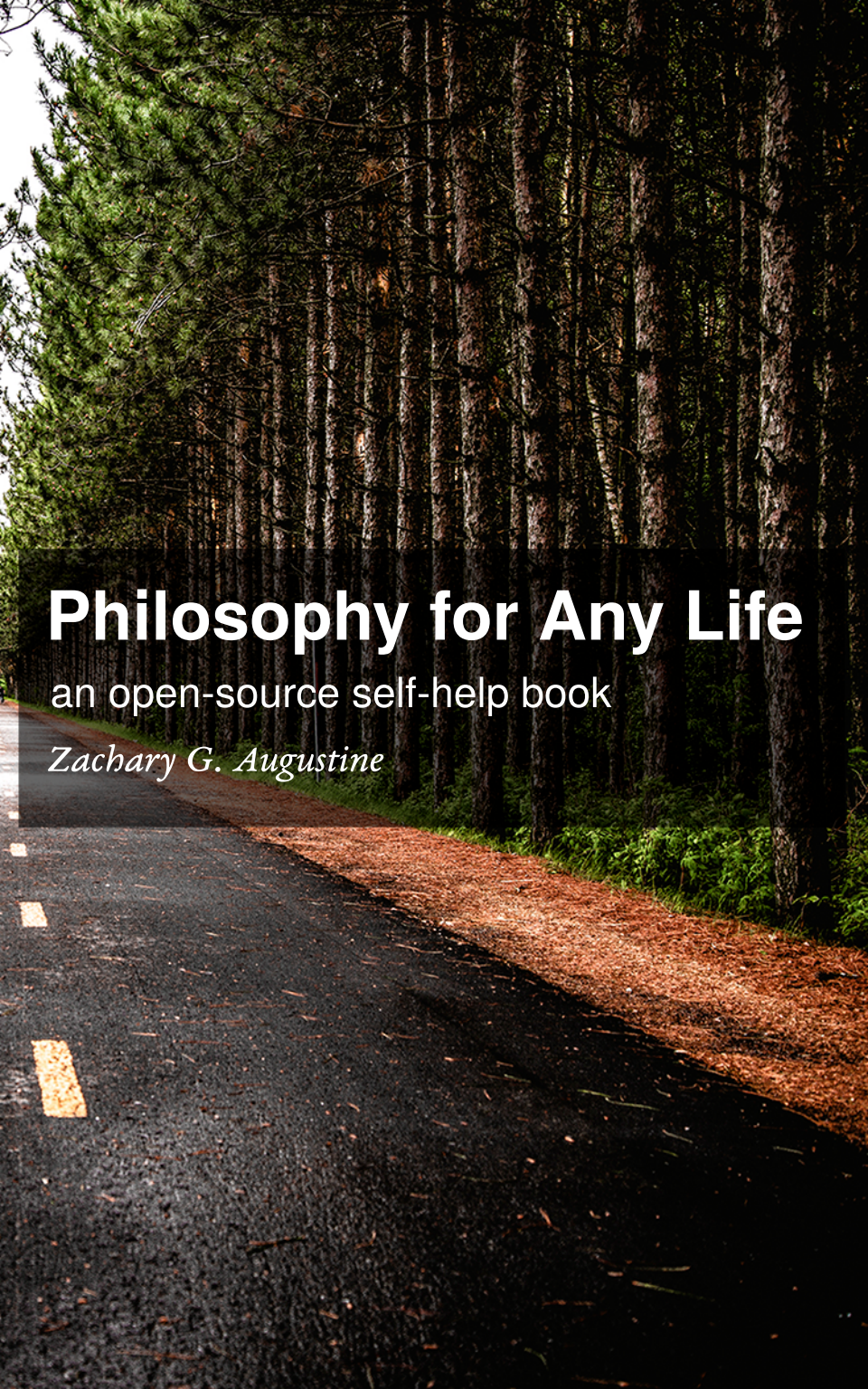




Philosophy for Any Life

an open-source self-help book

Zachary G. Augustine

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By Zachary G. Augustine

VI.O

29 September 2015

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To my sister, the strongest person I know

You have power over your mind – not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength.

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

Introduction: Philosophy and You

This book is a collection of strategies to help you deal with whatever life throws at you. I wrote this book because I wish someone wrote it for me.

I came to philosophy through my experiences with mental illness. When I left my rural hometown for the first time, I found myself alone at the University of Chicago. I began to feel overwhelmed and anxious at the prospect being both fully responsible and yet unable to entirely control my own life. This internal uncertainty manifest itself in Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, of which frequent intrusive thoughts were a symptom. I felt like I was losing control of my mind, and feeling only compounded my worries. My work began to suffer and the longer I stayed in such an intense academic environment, the more I suffered personally. I considered transferring back to my hometown where I could pass away my life in safe, uneventful ignorance, but effectively forfeiting my chances of going to graduate school and working to become a professor. Because I wouldn't ever experience the life I was leaving behind in Chicago, I had no way of knowing what I know now – how much I would have missed out on.

Remarkably, I then came across a book that inspired me to take action, calm my mind, and reverse my decay: the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, the last good Emperor of Rome. What was anxious became invigorating. What was overwhelming became inspiring. I began to feel the full weight of the life I would fail to live if I quit school.

An old book calmed my mind and transformed my life. The same spirit reverberate throughout the book you now hold. I offer relief to anyone who may be struggling. But this book isn't about me or Marcus Aurelius or even philosophy, not really. You won't need to know who any philosophers are or

what they said.

Instead, I will *show* you philosophy in action – in stories and essays and dialogues – so that you can understand it intuitively and use it yourself. The exercises that follow are mental, but they are entirely practical in focus. Philosophy was created to be used, to help you think differently, and to inspire change in your way of life.

This book rekindles the spirit of the Stoic philosophical tradition, now over two thousand years old. Ever since, Stoics have inspired readers to take positive action through an inspirational and sincere writing style. And in each generation since, new students offered up some of their own examples and metaphors to be passed down to the next. Stoicism is unique among philosophies in this way: it encourages the *remixing* of the original ideas. A Stoic student doesn't merely 'inherit' their teachers' ideas, they make them their own, developing creative techniques to express the same Stoic tenants in a new way. The original ideas are only amplified with each new reverberation. Stoicism is the same basic truths expressed through a hundred different people in a thousand different ways – and to the benefit of all.

In the spirit of this tradition, I am giving this book away. You are free to copy, share, redistribute, print, teach, remix, edit, transform, or otherwise build open this material, so long as you properly attribute what you use, and release any derivative works under the same license. You can read more about the open-content movement and download this book for free online at www.philosophyforanylife.com. If you find my book helpful, I encourage you to share it any way you wish. If you enjoyed the book or are still struggling, don't hesitate to write me.

I have written this book with three ends in mind:

- 1) To offer *relief from* the problems you face in life, both spiritually and

practically.

2) To *distill* the useful parts of ancient philosophy and infuse them in a more intuitive form to be enjoyed by the modern reader.

3) To *rediscover* a sense of wonder in familiar things.

Part I focuses on the essentials of life: the basic techniques for withholding judgement, discerning what is inside of your control and not, as well as acceptance, dealing with stress and mental illness, and mindfulness practices. Part II deals with learning how question yourself and your desires, your role both in nature and in society and how you can avoid being led astray in either. Part III is concerned with action, habit, purpose, and human nature – a mental kick in the pants to help you realize your own potential life yet unlived.

Philosophy has always been about action, and this book is no exception. It is about the value of your own life, and you can put philosophy to work to improve your own. Philosophy can help anyone who wants it to, and nothing would make me happier than for you to choose to live a full, happy, and flourishing life.

Your friend in life and in living well,

Zachary G. Augustine

zga@uchicago.edu

PART I: LIFE

Power

Character is power.

—Booker T. Washington

What is within yours?

Remember this. You will return to it again and again. Each time, this simple phrase will assume a new meaning.

If character is power, then what is within your character? The circumstances of your birth are not. You had no control whether you were born in America or Asia or Antarctica. It was never up to you.

You had no control over who your parents were, or what they were like, or if you even knew them. Your race, gender, or anything you were born into cannot define your *character*. It was not up to you if you were born in chains or without food. No, none of these external things can ever begin to define you. A realization dawns, “I see now that the circumstances of one’s birth are irrelevant. It is what you do with the gift of life that determines who you are.”¹

Anything that is not within your power has nothing to do with who you are. Your character is only, merely, and entirely what you can control. How you see the world. What you choose to believe. And how you respond through your actions. This is all you can truthfully claim to control.

And how easily you forget that your character is something you make for yourself! Your actions are all that determine your character – there is nothing more to it. Aristotle said, “only an utterly senseless person can fail to know that our characters are the result of our conduct.”² It is so obvious it hardly needs to be said. Aristotle is exactly right – no one fails to ‘know

it'. Yet despite your knowledge, this is something you, like all people, often choose to ignore.

Perhaps it is more pleasant, safer, easier, to believe that if you were only you born richer, smarter, or in a different time, you could be a better person. I feel better about myself when I know that right now is the best that I could be. That other things are holding me back. But of course I know that's not true. And it takes work to get better, which no one wants to do. So maybe it's time that I stop lying to myself in this way. To be honest about what I am in this moment, and what I could be.

All of this applies on two levels: morally and in terms of success. There is a difference between achievement and success. Are not the 'achievements' of the rich tainted by their origin in money? To believe that external, circumstantial factors determine success – a wholly different concept – is to prevent yourself from ever achieving it. To believe this most dangerous of falsehoods is to stunt your character before it has even begun to grow – to act in bad faith.

Even beliefs can be wrong. Beliefs, especially, are often wrong.

If character is power, then what is within your power? Thieves and aggressors are not. The actions of the governments that represent you are not. Not one of the actions of other people are fully within our power. Even whether or not we live is not up to us. Even illnesses, your reputation, and your personality are not entirely up to you. The locus of your own control grows small.

If character is but power, what's left?

The answer to this question is fundamental to life. It is the secret kernel of wisdom hidden in mountains of books. Or rather, hidden in plain sight but we are too blind to notice it. It has been passed down from teacher to

student in countless forms. There is no agreement, and some think there may be no answer. Like all important questions, we will work together to approach it from different angles. It is my hope that as the meaning of this most fundamental maxim – character is power – changes meaning, so will you. This act of reflection, one that changes as you yourself change through the very process of reflecting, is philosophy. You may not know it by this definition, but philosophy is hardly the useless, speculative subject you may think it is. While words and ideas themselves may be theoretical, once you embrace them the focus shifts entirely to action. The questions are practical, the focus is living a good life. For thousands of years, the most important ‘theoretical’ questions have been purely practical:

What (not) to think;

What to believe;

What to do.

Above all, philosophy has been the shield that protects us from our animal nature, the candle that illuminates the night our minds fills with demons, and the antidote to all the ills we inflict on ourselves.³ “Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal the suffering of man,” wrote Epicurus.⁴

The most famous philosopher of all, Socrates, said that all philosophy is preparing for death.⁵ Socrates has an important point, and we shall certainly deal with it, but I disagree – philosophy is living well. And these strategies for life are packaged and contained in maxims, or short slogans designed to trigger your memory and remind of what you learned before. The power of these maxims is in how they relate to each other. Quickly you will realize that the disagreements and arguments between these dead philosophers are

not an impediment to understanding. Instead, their disagreements provides us with options: countless strategies for dealing with the hardship of life. Some work better than others, and for different people. Their arguments are our toolbox.

All of this is to say that philosophy presents countless strategies for life. It is no accident that most of these focus on the difficult parts of life: hardship, unfulfilled desire, anger, and eventual death. Philosophy was not just something discussed in schools or brought out at cocktail parties. No, the purpose of philosophy has always been to practice it. Through internalizing and applying these concepts to situations in daily life, one can cultivate a kind of active practice of self-change. This deep insight was put forward by French scholar Pierre Hadot, who argued that the best philosophies begin to resemble a form of ‘spiritual exercise’ – one whose practice transforms the self and the soul into something beautiful and vibrant.⁶ Philosophy has filled that role of rational self-reflection for a long time.

It is my hope that by the end of this book you will not know the one true secret to life but several possibilities. And as these simple maxims grow and change from something common to take on a greater meaning, so, too, will you.

Fundamentals

Control

The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts: therefore, guard accordingly, and take care that you entertain no notions unsuitable to virtue and reasonable nature.

—Marcus Aurelius⁷

All is a matter of perspective. Or, “The world is nothing but change. Our life is only perception.”⁸ Good or bad, you live inside your mind, so you make it so. You must make it good.

Every day you will be confronted with things outside of your control. This is not bad. The things themselves cannot harm you. Rather, you harm yourself when you judge these accidental facts as bad. And so things outside of your control are nothing to regret, or worry about, or fear. When you are faced with something like this, tell yourself: I am freed from the burden of trying to control this.²

It is not enough merely to endure these things outside of your control; you must actively deny their importance. They are not relevant; they are indifferent. In a perfect world, you would be indifferent to indifferent things. But you are so used to calling them bad that your mind is often tossed around by things you can’t control. So you must, instead, reject these external things. To fail to deny them is to tacitly submit to things outside of your power. To remain neutral in the face of indifferent things is to behave in bad faith.¹⁰ You must, in a way, be active in your denial. Not that they happen – for every day you will face matters you cannot control – but rather, it is

the meaning of indifferent things that you must reject, that they hold any sway over you and your actions. And your actions are the only thing you can control entirely.

—Surely you admit that much in life is outside of your control.

Yes, of course.

—Then why do you resist those things?

On the contrary, I neither resist nor welcome things I cannot control. I am indifferent to what I can't control. Instead, I reject *their importance*. To welcome them is to excuse yourself for your own failures. This reinforces the pleasant illusion that you are not in control of your own life, replacing it instead with a comfortable falsehood that you're 'doing the best you can', that external factors entirely govern your being. But you are in control, you just refuse to accept it. And to resist them is to delude yourself in a different way, that you can change the will of others, control chance, or refuse the falling rain. This you will never be able to entirely control, and you must accept it, or you will grow frustrated. Instead, you must *learn* an accurate and precise perception of the world. You must be honest with yourself about this appraisal. Only then, will action become easy, and you will know the answer in every case: if you can change it, do so. If you can't, you must accept it.

—Even if I do accept that, won't that just lead me to become complacent – to stop trying to control what I can?

You already know the answer to your question – you said it already. The first step, more important than any other, is *recognizing* what is within your power. You don't need to deal with all of those other things right now. In this moment, your only focus is to internalize what we have just discussed.

You don't need to have all the answers, you only need to try to tell the difference between what you can affect and what you can't. It is so obviously true that there will be things outside of your control, yet constantly we frustrate ourselves instead of accepting them. Watch yourself for this habit, and break yourself of it. Try to recognize this fundamental distinction first, and the motivation to affect what you can will follow, you'll see. Now, all you need is the desire to get better, and the resolve to put in the effort when it matters.

—Don't you think that attitude is kind of defeatist? You really believe that you can be happy by giving up control over external things? I think when the time comes, you need your health and your family to be happy. You could lose these at any moment.

You again – don't you have anything better to do than to doubt yourself? Do you never tire of thinking of the worst outcome? To think that my conscience is such a downer. I swear, you are like a doubting little demon, sitting on my shoulder and questioning my every effort! You're getting ahead of yourself. You're missing the point of what we're working on right now. We'll deal with all of that later, and you'll see that it's not quite as it appears. It's not as if I can 'give up' control over something that was never within my control to begin with. It's just a matter of perspective, and that's what you have confused here. It's only natural, you probably have some mistaken beliefs of your own; I know I probably do.

As for health and family, they are outside of your control, but *only in part*. You *can* work on both. But part of this work is recognizing that you might lose them. This is nothing to be afraid of, it's just a fact. And you should be prepared. In fact, you're obligated to call it like it is and not pretend that they'll be around forever. And this fact of impermanence

shouldn't cheapen their value in your mind; it makes your time with them all the sweeter.

I'll deal with your doubts like I deal with anything else. First, I recognize that I can't control when your objections appear, or even what they are. It's natural for you to be a pessimist; I feel that same strain in myself often. In certain situations it may even help me to listen to your caution, as having an active conscience is not a bad thing.

But you can get carried away. So, second, I choose to reject your doubts. Now is not the time and you know it; now is the time to learn, and to do that we have to suspend doubt for a moment and actually try. It's like anything in life – like a lost set of keys or a broken car – you can't help when it happens or that it does. But it is absolutely essential to choose how to respond, in every case. It won't help you to get angry that your car is broken. Worse, it's counterproductive to get angry: that you couldn't see it coming, that it's in the past, that anger won't fix your car, and that you're already wasting time getting it fixed and moving on in life. The latter reason, you know, is the only thing that is truly within your control: your response to the perception of a broken car. The ability to choose your response is one of your greatest gifts – it very well may be the secret to happiness. It's so obvious it hardly needs stating, yet just watch your thoughts. How many times do you *make* yourself angry through choosing a counterproductive response? You know this to be true. So then you also realize how important it is to spend time on this, even though it's obvious.

Third and finally, I'll press on in spite of your doubts. This is the response I choose, and it's one of action. Changing my perceptions will take practice. But how much more peaceful to be concerned only with those things which I can actually affect.

Through drawing this division in my mind, I will separate the wheat from the chaff and safely discard that which I cannot control. With practice, I can train myself to recognize this more and more easily. Soon I will mold and temper my mind in such a way to accept the stresses and weights placed upon it. If I can make disciplining my judgement a habit, I will flex where previously I would have snapped. With practice, I will ride the waves of emotion that used to crash around me. I will forego uncertainty and excessive self-doubt for inner peace.

To domesticate your emotions, rather to be ruled by them – to stand up straight, not straightened – is to live in accordance with nature.¹² Only then can you respond properly to that which truly matters – matters of choice. Honest choice and just action are only possible with the clarity of a disciplined mind. So you must start at the beginning – which no one wants to do¹² – with watching your thoughts and rejecting those judgements of in-different things.¹³

There is a fundamental distinction in every human life. Look at your hands holding this book, your body in a chair. Your body is the limit of your control. Outside of it, the world is subject to many other forces, mostly other people but also sickness and inclement weather and the passage of time. All of this cannot be changed. This essential distinction of control is the ultimate principle of Stoicism. It grounds all that is to follow.

Nothing outside of your control can be changed directly. But through memory and foresight, humans have a seemingly unique gift to alter the world now to better suit us in the future. While we can't control the future, we can prepare ourselves, change our own minds and bodies, so that when

the future inevitably but unknowingly comes, we are ready. You can ready yourself for the future, rather than wait for it to come.

At every moment, realize that the present – the remarkable ability to think this very thought – has suddenly passed. That thought in the line above is now more distant. And now, even further buried. But the past, regardless of how past it is, is always irrevocable by simple virtue of it having passed. That is, one minute ago may as well be one year ago, it makes no difference.

So at every moment divorce yourself entirely from the past. Free yourself from the responsibility of remembering it, for either: it doesn't matter, or if it does matter, its use is separate from the negative feelings that accompany it.

Whenever you find yourself in the present moment – a snap of attention or focus or a simple awareness of the fact of life – look forward, for that present that was so clear a moment ago is already as distant as your childhood. Barrel ahead and make your future what you wish it already was.

Indifference

To be like the rock that the waves keep crashing over. It stands unmoved and the raging of the sea still falls around it.

—Marcus Aurelius¹⁴

You're eating lunch with a friend, who refers to you as a stoic kind of person. What, exactly, do they mean? Cold, emotionless, or overly rational is a fair interpretation. (You would be justified in taking offense at this,

which would serve the additional purpose of disproving yourself as emotionless. Although, you quickly realize, taking offense solves nothing.)

While commonplace, this use of the word could hardly be further from the truth. The Stoics were intense, but they were not emotionless. Even the English word ‘apathy’ is a mistranslation of a Stoic word (‘apatheia’), which translates literally as ‘without suffering’. If you are truly apathetic, you would be more properly understood as ‘invulnerable’, perhaps even ‘secure’ or ‘free’.

This misunderstanding is telling. In fact, it is illustrative of the true teaching of Stoicism, which feel at times like Buddhism. Mindfulness guru Jon Kabat-Zinn writes, “It is not always the pain per se but the way we see it and react to it that determines the degree of suffering we will experience. And it is the suffering that we fear the most, not the pain.”¹⁵ Too often, you think that emotions themselves cause problems. (If only you could be less angry, less jealous, more passionate, and so on.) Emotions are natural and cannot be denied or stopped. In themselves, feelings are not bad. It the anticipation and the fear that drives suffering. The mistaken belief that this feeling is bad, or harmful, or permanent. On the contrary, emotions are something to be enjoyed, and embraced, but not let grow out of hand. This is hardly a utilitarian desire to feel less pain – to feel in control is in itself a high form of pleasure. Emotions, both pleasant and unpleasant, follow as a natural extension of life, as natural as the bones and muscles that make up our bodies. And all living things can be trained and strengthened.

This ideal state of apathy is available to all. Aurelius writes, “The mind without passions is a fortress. No place is more secure. Once we take refuge there we are safe forever. Not to see this is ignorance. To see it and not seek safety means misery.”¹⁶ Aurelius is establishing the second key tenant of Sto-

icism, that of indifference to indifferent things. Together these two principles of control and indifference inform three disciplines, or active practices, integral to a good life. The three disciplines of judgment, of assent, and of action, each concerned with a different scale and focus, each with their own strategies and mental imagery, but each relying on the distinction between what is within and without your control.

Three Stoic Disciplines

Judgement

Thus I spoke, more and more softly; for I was afraid of my own thoughts and the thoughts behind my thoughts.

—Friedrich Nietzsche¹⁷

The Greek soldier Socrates stood with his feet frozen with morning dew. He was contemplating an unsolvable problem, one that has occupied philosophers for as long as we have accounts of people thinking. Socrates sought to explain why God allows innocent animals to die in forest fires, or a newborn to be born with cancer. They were pure, they did nothing to deserve their fate – so why did God allow it?

God must be, by definition, completely good, all-powerful, and all-knowing.

Evil befalls the innocent as well as the guilty.

God, as defined, would not allow evil to befall the innocent.

Therefore, god must either be unable, unaware, or unwilling to protect the innocent.

This is called the problem of evil, and it rarely seems to lead to any satisfactory conclusions. Indeed, most religious people do not take the existence of evil as a disproof of god.¹⁸

But it is not the only conclusion. Rather, we question the terms themselves: what does it *mean* for ‘evil’ to befall the ‘innocent’? Imagine a newborn, born with a life threatening illness. The baby was surely innocent; it had not time to make any mistakes in life. Why, then did it suffer this great evil of a premature death, and why did god allow it? This line of thought leads nowhere other than to the conclusion above.

We must redefine the question itself. Because death is a natural part of life, and experience tells us that it befalls the innocent as well as the guilty. We will all die. Because a premature death is entirely outside of your control, it is not something that determines your character. Death, then, is not an evil at all.

The question then becomes not whether or not the child was innocent, or even what god would or would not allow, but a question of evil – what is it?

Evil can't be caused directly by god, for it would go against our idea of what a god has to be like: a good god would never allow the innocent to die. If our world was like this, we wouldn't even have the concept of innocent and guilty, because punishment and reward would be dealt so consistently and without fail that we would have no experience of any alternative.

Similarly, if evil turns out to be merely a by-product, necessary side-effect, or unintentional side-effect of god's existence, then we will have to change our idea of what god is like.

Another alternative, however unsavory, is that god does not exist and evil is a personal creation.

However, there is another alternative, and one that allows us to deal with good and evil, directly, setting aside and working around the question of god. It prevents us from answering a question we may not know the answer to. But importantly it allows the coexistence of both god and the concept of evil.

That evil is a matter of our perception.¹⁹ This observation does not rely on any conception of god. It frees us from basing our sense of good and evil on anything we can't observe. Just as death is not an evil because it is not in our control, so, too, can we test our judgments against this metric.

Does it make any sense to talk about a good ball or a bad one? Perhaps one could say ‘this ball bounces well, so it’s good in that respect’. But to extend that property of bounciness to make a *judgement* about the ball as a whole is to go too far. While it is true and fair to say ‘this ball is bouncy’, to say ‘this is a good ball’ is to claim that your personal judgments matter more than the truth. It is a conceit of pride to extend your judgments as if they were fact.

No, the discipline of judgment strives for *objectivity*. This is more difficult than it sounds, because the only interface through which you can have any experience with the world is through your own eyes. Objectivity is a powerful concept, but it means something different from simple truth.²⁰ An objective judgment reflects the true nature of the object of judgment, yes, but it also reflects something about the nature of the judge: your nature, “To erase false perceptions, tell yourself: I have it in me to keep my soul from evil, lust and all confusion. To see things as they are and treat them as they deserve. Don’t overlook this innate ability.”²¹ It is a concern for the truth, even when the truth can be difficult or impossible to ascertain. And cultivating this sense of care is the path to strength in the discipline of judgment.

That is – not merely that I have the power to choose my response to any situation, but that I am happy that I have the power to. My happiness not only depends on that choice, but on the recognition of it as a choice. Merely having the ability to choose my response is enough to make me happy. So I choose to be happy, and nothing can make me unhappy once I make that choice.

Assent

A man standing by a spring of clear, sweet water and cursing it. While the fresh water keeps on bubbling up. He can shovel mud into it, or dung, and the stream will carry it away, wash itself clean, remain unstained....Dig deep; the water – goodness – is down there. And as long as you keep digging, it will keep bubbling up.

—Marcus Aurelius²²

Don't resist. To assent is to approve of whatever is happening. To assent is not to say 'yes' or 'no' but 'I understand'. Do this at every opportunity.

You can't stop the wind from blowing or refuse the falling rain.²³ It's okay to feel, or have opinions about whatever is happening to you. Whatever you are feeling, for whatever reason or no reason at all, just try to understand. That will always be enough. But don't let these opinions be confused for fact, and don't let them get out of hand.

It's okay to feel. But take it for what it is, nothing more. Don't add on your opinions as if they were something that existed outside of the tiny ball of fat called your brain.

Consent is a wonderful word to describe this process. It is active. Through your participation in life you constantly reaffirm that you embrace what is currently happening you to. You are, fundamentally and at every moment, in favor of the events that are unfolding. Consenting to life is saying 'yes' to chance – to fortune and misfortune, to circumstance favorable or not.

It's not bad, it just is. And that in itself is wonderful.

Our inward power, when it obeys nature, reacts to events by accommodating itself to what it faces – to what is possible. It needs no specific material. It pursues its own aims as circumstances allow; it turns obstacles

into fuel. As a fire overwhelms what would have quenched a lamp. What's thrown on top of the conflagration is absorbed, consumed by it – and makes it burn still higher.²⁴

Through accepting – neither welcoming nor resisting – everything that happens to you, you can begin to use the flux of chance to your advantage.

Be patient with yourself. You've likely entertained every thought that's entered your mind for a long, long time. Whenever you make a mistake, refocus yourself with firm but gentle reproach, "But what are you doing here, Perceptions? Get back to where you came from, and good riddance. I don't need you. Yes, I know, it was only force of habit that brought you. No I'm not angry with you. Just go away."²⁵

Action

Wisdom is indeed useful, but that it is a feeble thing unless it is derived from general principles – that is, unless it is based upon a knowledge of the actual dogmas of philosophy and its main headings. This subject is therefore twofold, leading to two separate lines of inquiry: first, is it useful or useless? And second, can it of itself produce a good man?...

For precepts will be of no avail while the mind is clouded with error ; only when the cloud is dispersed will it be clear what one's duty is in each case....

Advice is not teaching; it merely engages the attention and rouses us, and concentrates the memory, and keeps it from losing grip. We miss much that is set before our very eyes. Advice is, in fact, a sort of exhortation. The mind often tries not to notice even that which lies before our eyes; we must therefore force upon it the knowledge of things that are perfectly well known.

—Seneca²⁶

Action is perhaps more difficult than judgment or assent because it entails failing. In this sense, it can be discouraging. But in another sense, failing is a wonderful way to improve. And in that way, acting can become easier than the purely mental exercises of judgment and assent, especially as time goes on and you gain more experience in living.

Essential to action is accepting failure. *Learning* how to accept failure.²⁷ Aldous Huxley, most famous for writing the dystopian novel *Brave New World*, writes, “If you have behaved badly, repent, make what amends you can and address yourself to the task of behaving better next time. On no account brood over your wrongdoing. Rolling in the muck is not the best way of getting clean.”²⁸ If failure is a necessary component of action, then there is no need to despair when it inevitably appears. There is no need to dwell on it past a cursory glance. Instead, focus on any errors in judgment you may have committed, and move on.

A common objection is that Stoicism is too self-centered, too unrealistic, too unloving. On the contrary, the strict requirements of a Stoic life produce one of supreme love, and more importantly, realism. Your interactions with others will not be sullied by false interactions, which cheapen the real ones. No, only through an intense honesty can you yourself flourish, which is an obvious prerequisite for meaningful interactions with others.

In one of the most comprehensive (although dense) passages Hadot clarifies the relationship between the individual and how they treat others,

Stoicism is a philosophy of self-coherence, based upon a remarkable intuition of the essence of life. From the very first moment of its existence, every living being is instinctively attuned to itself; that is, it tends to preserve itself, to love its own existence, and to love all that can preserve this existence. This instinctive accord becomes a moral accord with oneself, as soon as man discovers by means of his reason that the supreme value is not those things which are the objects of this instinct for self-

preservation, but the reflective choice of accord with oneself, and the activity of choice itself. This is because voluntary accord with oneself coincides with the tendencies of universal reason, which not only makes each living being into a being in accord with itself, but makes the entire world as well a being in accord with itself....

This coherence with oneself is thus the fundamental principle of Stoicism. For Seneca, all wisdom may be summed up in the formula: 'Always want the same thing, and always refuse the same thing.' There is no need, Seneca continues, to add the tiny restriction 'as long as what one wants is morally good.' Why? Because, he says, 'One and the same thing can be universally and constantly pleasing only if it is morally right.'...

The goal, project, and object of Stoic philosophy are thus to allow the philosopher to orient himself or herself within the uncertainties of daily life, by proposing probable choices which our reason can accept, even if it is not always sure it ought to. What matters are not results or efficiency, but the intention to do good. What matters is to act out of one motive alone, without any other considerations of interest or pleasure: that of the moral good. This is the only value, and the only one we need.²⁹

Thus, a full and loving life follows easily from the execution of a few simple principles – judgment, assent, and action.

Simple, but by no means easy.

The Inner Citadel

No carelessness in your actions. No confusion in your words. No imprecision in your thoughts....To have that. Not a cistern but a perpetual spring. How? By working to win your freedom. Hour by hour. Through patience, honesty, and humility.

—Marcus Aurelius³⁰

These three disciplines of judgment, assent, and action are fundamental to a good life. Once you internalize the three disciplines, you can approach any situation in a new way. The disciplines allow you both to slow down and

think through a situation carefully when necessary, and also to have a ‘shortcut’ in mind for situations you’re dealt with before. A person armed with the three Stoic disciplines can think both more thoroughly and quicker than one without. This is particularly true when it comes to difficult situations that would freeze an unarmed or unprepared person in the throes of emotion; with Stoicism, you can effectively handle them with composure.

Keeping the three disciplines in mind is the key to understanding Stoic writings. Although this isn’t a book about the theory of Stoicism, but rather its practice, the theoretical understanding of these three disciplines does allow one to get real benefit from reading and contemplation. Stoic texts are not particularly difficult – they tend to be more informal and conversational than most philosophy proper – but there is a barrier to entry: most of them assume a base level of knowledge, that you already have the key to the map they’re about to provide. The three disciplines are the key that allows you to spend time navigating. That is, Stoic writings make little sense unless you realize that they are a written record of a spiritual exercise unfolding. Knowing this suddenly ‘unlocks’ a world of support – all the Stoics, their writings, and those who wrote about them.

The epigraph at the start of this book is by Marcus Aurelius and it reads, “You have power over your mind – not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength.” This has great personal significance for me, and it functions well as an epigraph. More importantly, however, it is a perfect distillation of the essence of Stoicism, whose tenants correspond exactly to the order of Aurelius’ presentation. The discipline of judgment is ‘power over your mind’, the discipline of assent in internalizing that you can’t control ‘outside events’, and the discipline of action in the ‘strength’ you gain to act

from the realization of the former two disciplines. The three Stoic disciplines function as a triangle, with judgment and assent supporting action, just as the mind supports and ultimately controls the body. Often we find ourselves frustrated at the physical world or our ability to act. But this relies entirely on our perception – our ability to judge and assent. It's important to reorient your focus on these foundational practices aspects.

Thus, the form, order, and brevity of a maxim hides a complex conceptual framework. Whereas the maxim is brief and shallow, the framework it reveals is deep and difficult. A maxim can then remind you of these more complex ideas, functioning in a way as a sign or mental 'pointer'. Realize that it is impossible and impractical to have the entire framework at hand. Rather, the time you spend considering the whole conceptual framework is a kind of spiritual practice. Working slowly through thoughts is like practicing a new technique for the first time.

Thinking slowly and carefully is also a way of changing the way you feel about yourself – practice builds confidence and trust in your ability to handle new problems. You 'know your way around', becoming more experienced and familiar with the kinds of reactions that work and don't work for you, and in what situations. This feeling is one of calm confidence, a sense of relaxation and peace in yourself and your ability to handle whatever situation you may face. (Ironically, your current situation is always to face whatever situation presents itself. Think of that as another shortcut). This feeling of peace is what you'll try to cultivate in your practice. When you come across a maxim, you'll remember the feeling of peace, not the conceptual ideas. You may even feel more at peace, merely by remembering that a phrase *is* your maxim. A maxim simply reminds you that you know what to do. You've handled situations like this before, even when they were once new to you,

and you can do it again.

Each time I read the quote, the hours of reading and meditation that I put in previously suddenly back to me. Reflection upon learned techniques is a retreat, a refreshment, a reinvigoration:

People try to get away from it all – to the country, to the beach, to the mountains. You always wish that you could too. Which is idiotic: you can get away from it anytime you like. By going within. Nowhere you can go is more peaceful – more free of interruptions – than your own soul.³¹

This is the nature of the inner citadel – the sanctuary of your own mind, secure and impenetrable. With discipline you can keep it well-stocked and fortified even in the face of immense hardship. These disciplines require practice, and a bit of cunning. Maxims are essential to the process of fortification.

The quote itself is a way for me to keep these practices always at hand, always ready. Of maxims and the value of advice, Seneca writes:

The soul carries within itself the seed of everything that is honorable, and this seed is stirred to growth by advice, as a spark that is fanned by a gentle breeze develops its natural fire. Virtue is aroused by a touch, a shock. Moreover, there are certain things which, though in the mind, yet are not ready to hand but begin to function easily as soon as they are put into words. Certain things lie scattered about in various places, and it is impossible for the unpracticed mind to arrange them in order. Therefore, we should bring them into unity, and join them, so that they may be more powerful and more of an uplift to the soul.³²

Here Seneca assumes that everyone has a natural sense and inclination to do good – it simply needs to be guided in order to grow. If the teacher (or advice) is too intense, it could extinguish the natural desire to learn. Instead, the spark must be gently fanned. This works well because you can only learn so much ahead of time. Most of the learning will take place during the difficult moment. All that is necessary is to become familiar with the general

principles ahead of time, so they can function as a reminder later, in the critical moment.

Creating this reminder is necessary ahead of time because, as we all know too well, it's much more difficult to think clearly in the moment. Negative impulses in particular command attention rapidly and forcefully. This is unavoidable; rather, reject the impulse as soon as you can after it appears. Recall not the specific content of your earlier readings or practices, but that you did so. Recalling this fact may ease your mind – trust your past self's preparation, remember all the time you spent on these techniques and concepts, or remind yourself of the confidence that all people naturally have when it comes to their ability to act.

If you are in a difficult situation and the feeling of peace does not appear, then the concepts may not be 'at hand' – you may need to refresh your grasp on the concepts when you have time. You may simply need more practice. Everyone, even people with 60 years of life experience, struggles with things as simple as getting angry. It doesn't get easier simply with time – it takes effort for experience to be at all useful. It's vital to keep a positive attitude toward failures, because they show you precisely where and in what amount you need to work more. Intense, negative emotions are like leaks in a dam – they show you where there's too much pressure and what areas need more support. So take a step back after you experience an intense situation. Stop analyzing the situation itself, but instead remember what you were feeling while the situation was unfolding. Be honest with yourself and reject the impulse to return to the specifics of the situation – who said what, their tone, or gestures – no, these perceptions all happened and it is natural to have certain responses, but which did you entertain? Certainly you indulged the desire to have negative responses, because those impulses were stronger than

those for patience, or compassion, or kindness. They were only stronger because they get more practice. If you want to strengthen your emotional responses in the correct, positive direction, you have to trace your impulses. Simply watching your emotional responses is the first, crucial step to changing yourself for the better. The phrase ‘first step’ is often said condescendingly because it implies that it’s small or easy or insignificant. These things are all true! But that’s not why it has a negative connotation. That comes from how often you see someone talk of change and fail to do anything. It also reminds you of your own failures in that regard, and everything you’ve left undone. Fundamentally, it is guilt or shame we feel when we condescend anyone else. Everyone knows taking the first step is the only way to get better, yet no one wants to do it. No one wants to start at the beginning. The only thing worse than taking a small step is to try and skip it – you fall.

When you fail, it is also completely reasonable that a situation was too difficult or too intense for you to handle with your current level of skill. That’s okay because you can’t control what you’re faced with or when. Some situations will be more difficult than others, and you don’t know when they’re going to come or in what order. But they will eventually come, and it is your responsibility to prepare yourself for the future. So if you’re reading this: know that soon you will be called upon, and your practice will be put to the test.

You now know what to do.

Chicken

...that one day he ran into Socrates, who had just bathed and put on his fancy sandals – all very unusual events. So he asked him where he was going, and why he was looking so good.

-Plato³³

You walk into the large marketplace in the center of the city.

Today you hope to buy some chickens. You approach a farmer who looks friendly enough and engage him in conversation. Several chickens of various size and plumage roam about in a small pen.

Suddenly a strange man approaches you and so rudely interrupts your conversation. You've heard about the village idiot – famous for unkempt appearance, clothes worn bare, and sandals falling apart – but you've never actually seen him until now. He has a potbelly and snub-nose, and is quite short. You try to ignore him, hope he'll go away on his own accord, but he persists. He's like a fly – annoying enough to bother you, but not annoying enough to swat away. You'll have to talk to him, and hopefully he'll be satisfied enough to leave you alone.

What you're doing in the market today? The ugly man says. You don't look like much of a city dweller. Most of those who live here are frail, whereas you seem more a bit hardier.

His flat, ugly face stares right at you. Doesn't he know any better? Can't he see how intrusive he's being, and rude at that? As if he was prompted by your thought, the strange man smiles knowingly. This smile is even more confusing.

I'm here to barter some of my crop for meat, you say, and to catch up on

the happenings of the town. And yes, I live a half day's ride out from town, so every chance to come to the market is an exciting time. Not much happens out in the countryside.

He nods slowly while stroking his beard. After a pause, he stands up straighter than before, suddenly more composed. You sense that he's left the pleasantries behind.

The ugly man speaks again in earnest, entreating you, so you are here for nourishment – for the soul and for the mind. What if I told you that you'll leave unsatisfied? I say this not to be confrontational, but in the hopes that you will be less disappointed when the time comes. Although as I speak these words I realize that, given the choice, most people would not wish to know in advance about unsavory future events. Although my loose tongue has deprived you of that option, it is still up to you if you wish to know the truth. Forgive me, for I have an inner voice of sorts – what you may call a conscience – that compels me to speak. I realize that it is often unfortunate, but I cannot help it. What say you?

His smile fades and is replaced by one of genuine concern.

Your initial hesitation has been replaced by one of curiosity.

I don't understand, you say, what are you getting at? Do you know something I don't?

Ah no, the ugly man says, his smile returning. I know little more than you. In most everything I know far less. But it is not knowledge I seek to impart to you, for I have little, but merely perspective. I see things in such a way that you may find useful. May I?

You nod, signaling him to speak.

Well, the man continues, Our bodies lead us this way and that, chasing fruit one day and meat the next. In this way we are little more than animals,

don't you agree? As quickly as the desire for food or drink or sex appears, it dissipates as soon as it is satisfied. Perhaps you can remember the last time you were overcome by desire of this kind. You satisfied it and felt a strange sensation – not pleasure, but merely the relaxation of desire, and for only a moment at that. Yet what sensation replaces it? Are they the same – to be satisfied and to feel no desire?

His eyes are fixed on you, waiting for a response.

Well, I haven't given it much thought, you stammer.

That's okay, he says, I haven't either. Give it a try, we will think through it together. What do you say?

You pause. This man hasn't asked for money, or food, or anything despite his slovenly appearance. What could he possibly want?

Well, you finally say, I'd say they were different. There have been times – such as now, even – when I have felt no desire but am still not satisfied. So they cannot be the same.

He smiles widely, his face transforming from that of a pig to that of a young cherub – still ugly but much happier.

Now we are getting somewhere, he says. You are right, I think. There must be some other impulse, it may even be fair to say that some other kind of desire is responsible for our satisfaction. I agree – now I feel no desire but I am not quite satisfied. What else could it be? I haven't the slightest idea.

The ugly man adjusts his toga and runs his fingers through his beard. He is deep in thought and seems pained by the problem at hand. What a strange man. There's nothing he could possibly gain from this, but he seems harmless enough.

So you offer a solution.

Well, you say, perhaps satisfaction is simply another, different kind of

desire. For example, when I have enough to drink, I can still be hungry. And right now, you explain, I am neither thirsty nor hungry, but I could still have other desires.

His brow wrinkles.

If that were so, he says, then satisfaction would have a specific thing that would cause it. Both thirst and hunger are satisfied by specific things. But satisfaction itself – I haven't the slightest idea.

The chicken farmer you were talking to before the interruption is intrigued but otherwise silent. He smiles nervously at the ugly man, who catches his eye for the first time.

You there, the ugly man asks the farmer, how much for your finest bird?

Five pieces of silver, he says picking a stocky fowl.

Well I only have three, the ugly man says, laughing, so how about a bird that's slightly less fine?

The chicken farmer procures another bird, a red rooster with feathers of fine metallic blue and green. The ugly man hands over the pieces and grasps the chicken under his arm as you might carry a basket.

What do you think of this chicken? He asks, passing you the bird.

It's a fine chicken, you say. Its eyes are clear and lively, and, although healthy, it is fat. This is precisely the kind of chicken I wished to purchase when I first came to the market.

The ugly man takes it back, lifts it in front of his face, and coos at it.

Yes, he purrs, amazing creatures, chickens. Their history is tied up in ours, if you didn't know. We have lived with chickens for longer than we can remember. And yet they still know no better as to why we keep them around.

He grabs its slender neck in one hand and its feet in the other. In one,

swift motion he snaps the neck. The chicken dies instantly and painlessly. Body limp, blood drains from the broken neck, coating his hands.

The chicken farmer's face flushes just as red. Not that he is at all unfamiliar with the sight of a dead bird, but that the market is not an appropriate place for slaughter. His wares are on display, and blood is unpalatable for sales. This fool is giving him just as hard of a time as he is you.

The ugly man notices his discomfort and laughs heartily.

My apologies, he shouts, suddenly quite loudly. Everyone, I do not know this man here! My folly is my own. Pay this kind farmer no mind.

He laughs again, clutching his large belly with one hand and holding the chicken by the neck with the other. Despite being completely comfortable with the situation at hand, the ugly man extends the bird to you,

I bought this for you, he says.

Remembering that the ugly man bought it with his last three pieces of silver, you decline with a wave of the hand.

Nonsense, he shakes his head, money is of little value to me.

Reluctantly, you accept the chicken, if only to see where this stranger leads you.

Yes, it's a fine bird, no? He asks you.

You hold it out from your body, so the dripping blood doesn't stain the good robes you wore for this infrequent journey into town.

The man smiles again, but this time is unable to feign ignorance. No? He asks, is something wrong? Is this not what you are here to do – to buy the meat you so desire, to kill and cook it yourself, to feast on its flesh?

The chicken farmer, face deep red, steps out from behind his table and confronts the ugly man.

What are you getting at, you fool? He shouts. Do you realize how difficult you're making this for me? What do you care? You have no money. And now, this man will buy nothing from me!

The chicken farmer's face is so close to the ugly man's face that his hot breath moved his beard. The ugly man's smile doesn't fade. If anything, it grows wider. At that very moment, the ugly man reaches out and kisses the farmer. The ugly man smacks his lips and paces away to talk to the crowd. The chicken farmer's face can't get any more red, so it begins to turn purplish in embarrassment.

Precisely right! He says.

The ugly man is ecstatic, surprising given the chicken farmer's outrage only moments ago. You feel uncomfortable just watching the exchange. The ugly man points at you, then to the chicken farmer.

This man does not want to buy your chickens. He says. This man doesn't even want to eat meat! What he really wants is something else entirely.

The ugly man paces over to you.

You, he says grabbing your shoulders, you were right when you said that satisfaction itself was something separate and apart from any individual desire. We agreed on this, yet this brought us no closer to saying what satisfaction actually was, don't you agree?

What you say is true, you respond.

Yes, he says, brow wrinkling, it is not as if one can go to the market and buy an animal that, once slaughtered, will relieve our aimless nature in the same way a chicken can relieve our hunger for meat. And as various and disparate as all the desires our body cries out for are, none can satisfy satisfaction itself.

The chicken farmer retreats back behind his table. He crosses his arms

and pouts.

Yet this man here, the ugly man says, shaking your shoulders a little. This beautiful ignorant man has discovered why this is so! Precisely because no desire can satisfy satisfaction, we can conclude that satisfaction is unsatisfiable. Satisfaction is not a desire that can be fulfilled. No, it is not even something of the body. Rather, satisfaction is a state of the mind. The mind, so wonderful and complex, yet depending entirely on the fragile body. Even something as simple and natural as hunger or sexual desire can render us unable to think clearly. To say nothing of the more complex and overwhelming desires: the artificial hungers for power, greed, and reputation. How meaningless, when you look down at the chicken and realize just how quickly the mind leaves its fragile shell. How often we forget that such escape is inevitable, and not that far away. And here the weaknesses of the body actually point us to a more fundamental truth – that the body is entirely separate from the mind. Is this not so? I dare you to disprove it. When you held the chicken, it revolted you. The knowledge that it was once alive, and it being slaughtered so close to us, your fellow men, still so full of life, disgusted you. Your desire faded even quicker than would have had it been satisfied by seven chickens roasted on a spit for you. Why? Simple – holding the dead chicken, feeling the blood drain from its body, reminded you of your own body. An enormous amount of effort goes into forgetting that we – our bodies – are but animals. Everything we celebrate, our markets and buildings and books and statues, goes to further this illusion. And it is precisely the nature of this illusion that supplies us our satisfaction. For if we were but animals, there could be no satisfaction. Satisfaction must lie in our recognition that we are *not* animals. Our lives as we know it rest upon this point. It *offends* us to consider that we are but animals, ruled by desire. For what else

could we be?

The ugly man crackles with energy, pacing about the square and entreating the new onlookers he has attracted.

How quickly your desire fades! He laughs again. And what replaces it? Disgust – not for the chicken, for that is only natural, but for the body that holds such sway over you. The body that wracks your mind with desire – it itself as fleeting and meaningless as life itself. This sense of disgust has deep roots in the very core of our nature. The shame you feel when desire has faded, the disdain we all have for the passions of the body – these come from our fear of death. I have said before that all of life is but preparation for death. It is natural for me to doubt, but I have tried to disprove this and I cannot find a way.

Forgive me, he pants, for I am compelled by my inner voice to speak in situations such as this. But don't you see, precisely because this illusion matters so much to us – us as individuals and even more importantly us people as a whole – we would go to any lengths to maintain the artificial division between man and nature. To maintain the ignorance of death which I have so blatantly offended by speaking.

So I fear my words here are ill received, he says. Make no mistake, I know what I say is unpopular, it may make you angry, yet I cannot restrain myself from the truth. As long as we are gathered here, I must speak it. When the desires of the body fades all that remains is the one true desire – that for distancing ourselves from our animal nature – to forgo the desires of the flesh and to replace them the singular desire of the mind: knowledge. This is something you can only find yourself, and you will never find it unless you search.

The ugly man walks back to you.

The way I see it, he explains more calmly, is there are two paths. The first, is to chase these desires that our body presents to us, one after another and without ending. This option is free to you – you are here to buy a chicken, after all, so it must be your choice already in some sense – but, as I have shown, it leads nowhere. The other option, runs contrary to all that you know. It is not easy, or even pleasurable. But it is real, in a way that the desires of the flesh can never be. And I understand your hesitation. But wouldn't it be wonderful to see just how deep the truths of the mind can go?

He smiles, grasping your hand and shaking it hard.

Thank you, he says. You have led me to discover something that I won't soon forget. I must go now to the gymnasium – my students will appreciate this revelation – but if you ever see me again, please, remind me of this great occasion and the time we shared here together in the marketplace.

You blink, trying to take in all that has happened in such short a span. You realize that you don't even know this man's name. That he had just walked up to you and started this without as much as an introduction.

But who are you, kind stranger? You say.

Oh, he laughs again, clutching his potbelly, I am Socrates, scourge of Athens and he who knows nothing.

Simple Rules

The energy of the mind is the essence of life.

—Aristotle³⁴

All of nature's forms of life, some dizzyingly complex, can be traced through the steady operation of such simple rules. Because so much time has elapsed, on a scale so grand, it is almost unimaginable that the rules could be so simple. Bongo drummer Richard Feynman says, "There is such a lot in the world. There is so much distance between the fundamental rules and the final phenomena that it is almost unbelievable that the final variety of phenomena can come from such a steady operation of such simple rules."³⁵ And yet just a few laws of nature have produced creatures as diverse as the dinosaurs and the octopus in addition to the great cities of human beings.

We – as intelligent, social animals – have quite literally *created* the culture in which we live the entirety of our lives. Our culture contains within it complex laws and conventions of our own design, yet always in reference to the rules of nature we intuitively understand. As a result, our way of life is now almost entirely mental, with our work, social interaction, political structures, and means of sustenance largely unbound from the physical world. We live inside our heads.

And so it came to be that from the steady operation of such simple rules an animal, capable of not just preserving its own complexity but actually creating something new, emerged. What we have created – our way of life – is now entirely separate from, but still based on, our once natural way of life.

But we as individuals suffer in new ways for old reasons. That is, our animal nature betrays our modern, social way of life and causes us countless

problems. Our emotions, desires, fears they are all designed to live in the cruel world of nature. Suffering is nothing new for us – we have new software on an old machine.

All of our default mental models are outdated and ineffective in the new world we've created through culture.

But in the modern world, if you're reading this book, there's no reason to suffer.

Our lives are now mostly mental, as our most of our problems in the developed world. They are no less real, but, like all things mental, they are within our control.

More than just theoretical concepts, mental models are habits and actions designed to change your life, yet abstracted and communicated in though through time and from one person to another. Mental models are like a bicycle for the mind – accelerating, amplifying, and enhancing, and out all the effort and energy that goes in.³⁶ So we must make new mental models to replace the outdated ones. Or you can continue to suffer. It's up to you.

The rules of the game are simple. Simple, but not easy.

These kind of problems require discipline, willpower, and a bit of luck. It will be a tremendous effort, but the only way to ease your suffering is to change yourself. This is a fundamental characteristic of the human race: the *ability* to look at oneself and decide to change. But it is a choice, and you will only succeed if you choose to succeed. Choice is your power.

Lucky for us, there is a long tradition of people facing the same problems, and coming up with innovative solutions. Smarter, stronger people than us have tried and failed so we can succeed.

Any problem you could possibly face has been dealt with before. Anything you could possibly think has been thought before. It's probably even written down somewhere for you to read.

It is a measure of the supreme universality of the human race that this is so. We have extended our memories and our lives through writing. Our ancestors have passed on this knowledge so we may use it and live a better life, "Lessons in how to live human reality, with all that that implies – those are the enduring lessons of ancient philosophy".³²

So you must internalize – not simply understand or merely believe but absorb deeply – that we are all part of the same whole, each of us a faint, single star, in a universe shining with light.

Patterns in Nature

The way loaves of bread split open on top in the oven; the ridges are just by-products of the baking, and yet pleasing, somehow: they rouse our appetite without our knowing why. Or how ripe figs begin to burst. And olives on the point of falling, the shadow of decay gives them a peculiar beauty. Stalks of wheat bending under their own weight. The furrowed brow of the lion. Flecks of foam on the boar's mouth.

—Marcus Aurelius³⁸

Nature can't see its own patterns. Plants can hardly move, let alone think. Yet, each plant contains within itself a microcosm of the whole of nature. Not in entirety, for that would be absurd, but in essence, yes. As humans, we, too contain within our minds and bodies many of the same patterns that nature has so crafting over endless time. Because they are inside of us, we look for them in the natural world, and are delighted by their presence. These patterns are so apparent and so attractive to us because they run deep; almost as deep as the roots of the tree of life itself. The patterns of nature are not simply beautiful, there is an important reason for this aesthetic sense, one in which these patterns are built into nature, and nature is built into us.

Patterns are universal. And our minds have grown to feel a familiar hunger for them. So now we find them everywhere we look.

Extend your fingers straight. The wrinkles on your knuckles – little squares and triangles densely packed like the skin of an elephant – are identical to the rhythmic cracks in the mud of a riverbed dried by drought, identical to those that form as the crust of lava cools, identical to the cells of a

plant under a microscope, identical to the street grids of unplanned, sprawling cities like London, identical to the veiny fill of a leaf between its major lobes. Cracking of this form is an efficient way to fill space when the fill behavior is random and applied through a method of increasing intensity i.e. the growth of a city or the veins of a leaf or mud stretching as it is dried by the sun.³² The brain has these kinds of cracks too, in its folds, which are again the result of the dual selection pressure for the heaviest brain that can pass through the mother's birth canal without harming her. To pack the largest brain in the smallest head was our best chance of survival at one point in our evolution.

The head of a sunflower is densely packed with seeds, spiraling out in the Fibonacci sequence. The sunflower doesn't know any better, but plants with more seeds reproduce more successfully. This simple fact results in the beautiful spiral, which happens to be the most densely packed-pattern possible. Sunflowers are doubly impressive because of the massive weight of the seed head, supported by a long, thin stalk. There are clear advantages to being taller – more exposure to precious sunlight – but with a heavy head you can only grow so tall before the stalk snaps. So there is a definite upper limit on the size of the head and the height of the plant. The opposite is true; there is an opposing pressure that eliminates short sunflowers or those with small heads. Not enough seeds in the seed head and you may be outcompeted by sunflowers with more seeds, lowering your chance growing to maturity and reproducing. Short sunflowers don't get enough sun, also limiting their ability to reproduce. Repeating this dance of upper and lower limits results in a finely-tuned organism. The perfect balance of plant height and head weight. Any taller and it would snap, but any less seeds would eventually fail to reproduce.

The same notes repeat again and again, overwhelming evidence of a common root: the steady laws of a regular world unspun through endless time. The patterns run deep, almost relentless in their applications. You would be blind not to see it; foolish to ignore it. Of this universal order, Aurelius writes

What happens to each of us is ordered. It furthers our destiny.

And when we describe things as 'taking place', we're talking like builders, who say that blocks in a wall or a pyramid 'take their place' in the structure, and fit together in a harmonious pattern.

For there is a single harmony. Just as the world forms a single purpose, comprising all purposes. Even complete illiterates acknowledge it when they say something 'brought on' this or that. Brought on, yes. Or prescribed it. And in that case, let's accept it – as we accept what the doctor prescribes. It may not always be pleasant, but we embrace it – because we want to get well. Look at the accomplishment of nature's plans in that light – the way you look at your own health – and accept what happens (even if it seems hard to accept). Accept it because of what it leads to: the good health of the world, and the well-being and prosperity of...the world as a whole.⁴⁰

Whether or not you buy into the notion of destiny, or fate, or determinism, the point remains. It does not matter whether or not things are preordained, for even a random world is ordered and logical. This is seen again and again by patterns in the natural world.

Consider bees. Their wings are laughably small, so much so that their flight was argued to be impossible. But the wings of bees are finely tuned to the size of their large, fuzzy bodies so as to maximize the amount of pollen they can carry. Bees waste nothing: they use this pollen to make honey – pure energy – and spend this time and energy to build a hive for future generations. Bees intuitively use what we must use math to prove: that hexagons are a fantastic shape for building. A grid of tessellated hexagons maximizes the

perimeter surface area per unit volume better than any other shape. Each cell of the honeycomb has entry and exit points. And this fantastically complex and astonishingly regular honeycomb was built simultaneously, with bees starting at different corners and in the middle, perfectly meeting and converging at the borders. Bees can fill a sheet of any size with no gaps. A hive of bees may as well be one organism. (It certainly evolves as one.) And a hive functions perfectly with its environment, too. Bees grow and evolve with the flowers, predicting each other's changes to the benefit of the whole natural world.

This sense of wonder found in nature is not idle chatter. You must recognize your common identity and strive to live up to the orderly ideal of nature. Strive to be like a bee, which never fails to fulfill its function.⁴¹ Function as a human in the fullest sense – not as mere animal, or individual, or even father, but as a member of the greatest family to grace the universe: nature. In your dealings with others, build a honeycomb. Think and act correctly even when you are separated from others. In doing so, humanity will build a honeycomb in accord with the universal order of nature. To do otherwise – to lie, to act unjustly, to be misled by false perceptions – is to act against nature and betray the beauty all natural beings hold inside of themselves.

For the sense of beauty that we find in the sand and the surf and the stars is not something exterior to us humans. Nature is not a beautiful object – it is beautiful because we are part of its order. As Alan Lightman says of our role as part of the universe

...our brains developed out of nature...and the architecture of our brains was born from the same trial and error, the same energy particles, the same pure mathematics that happen in flowers and jellyfish...it is nonsensical to ask why we find nature beautiful. We are not observers on the

outside looking in. We are on the inside too.⁴²

And so the concept of symmetry appeals to us innately as a reflection of the universal order of nature. We have emerged as a kind of order out of a chaotic nature. Humans love patterns and order because that's what we are.

Yet I'll be the first to tell you that asymmetry can be as beautiful as the most regular snowflake. The splaying of a field of corn, the blotches of a cow, the cracks on a loaf of bread, a chipped tooth, a beauty mark, or strand of hair that escapes again and again from its position behind the ear – these are the hauntingly beautiful visions of life.⁴³ Their appeal is found not in order but disorder. Asymmetry reminds us of life's incredible fragility. For just as ripe fruit tastes the sweetest the moment before it spoils, life is all the sweeter with the knowledge that it is short. Symmetrical forms show us that life persists – creating new life in its image and striving to graft an order that can stand up against the erosion of entropy. But inevitably things wear down and fall apart. And asymmetry gently reminds us of this fact – not in a distressing way, but like a friend that allows you to appreciate all the good that still remains. This gives youth an energy and old age a melancholic but warm sense of weariness.

Children are beautiful in youthful energy and flawed asymmetries. They are like bread. You can prepare all you want, to attempt to form them, but just as the cracks in the crust are unknowable before baking, children have a delightful quality of novelty. It is the unknowability and irregularity that gives the cracking crust its beauty. These things resemble life in the fullest sense. They are truly present, living and reacting to whatever happens. Be a child for as far as you can go. Children are made by us, yes, but their specificity is outside of our control – that belongs to nature. That belongs to an

order that is unseen, an order that has the appearance of randomness.

Like all that is good and natural, bees are not an impossibility but, rather, the upper limit, the logical conclusion of a specific purpose being filled. Nature demands of the bees that they fulfill their function. And so too, nature demands that we fulfill ours. What is our function? To live in accordance to nature. Aristotle remarked that plants can eat and reproduce, and animals can see and feel. Pleasure belongs in this area of life. As humans we inhabit the pleasures of food and sex from time to time, but to rest there indefinitely is to betray our human nature or an animal one. No, I choose to transcend my animal nature for something higher. For we are animals gifted with rationality, itself a chance at serenity, wisdom, and happiness. Happiness comes first with the mastery of judgement, then of assent to nature, then in just action. To fail to achieve this internal mastery is to betray the trust that nature has placed in us by virtue of each of our astonishing lives.

The Epicureans claim that there is no order to nature. For them, the universe is random atoms, flailing about like the bodies of newborn calves. Let us suppose for the sake of argument, that this is true. Even if it were so, the answer would be the same: suspend judgement to domesticate your emotions, assent only to that which is within your control, and act justly in the face of anything. These principles lead to happiness, even in the face of complete randomness. Even if the world is random, there is still an order within you.⁴⁴ It remains your responsibility to cultivate that natural order, to develop yourself in accord with your own nature which uniquely yours yet in deep accord with the requirements of more universal nature. To ignore this is to behave lower than an animal, which at least knows what is good for itself – unlike the fool who is angered by the falling of rain or the beating

of the sun. As Aurelius often said, providence or atoms – virtue is still up to you.⁴⁵

Virtue is difficult to define, but simple to perform. Simple, but never easy. First, you must clearly distinguish what is within your power, and what is without. Then, you must come to understand how important this distinction is, and its relevance to anything you may face: that what is within your power is your responsibility to affect, and what is without is painful to even try. You must stop trying to control anything that is not within your power to do so. These two principles of perception are only useful if you internalize them and come to believe them. Only then can you begin to put these principles into action, and strengthen them through practice. With every new situation, ask yourself: am I viewing this situation as it truly is, not letting false or selfish thoughts interfere with reality as it truly is? This is the discipline of judgment, and it is the fundamental principles put into practice. Only then, with an objective view of the world, can you practice the discipline of assent: of accepting whatever you are faced with, whether it is good or bad. These two entirely mental disciplines are vital to the third: the discipline of action. You can only act correctly when your mind is in order.

For a sense of that order, look to nature. Have you ever seen an animal wracked with worry, torn between two courses of action? No, they always act in full accord with themselves. Their minds are simpler, yes, but they also don't let themselves get bogged down with useless or false judgments about the world. They can't afford to; it's a manner of life and death whether or not what the deer sees is truly there. We can afford to falter, in our comfortable homes. Humans are no longer punished by nature for their mistakes,

and that is a wonderful opportunity. But our minds have gotten soft as a result, and like an addict, they are never satisfied with what they already have.

Judgment, assent, and action. These are the three disciplines that you must practice to tame your wild mind and bring it in accord with the simple, orderly beauty found all throughout nature. Only then with its principles of distinction and coherence be realized within you. Only through purging these delusions and illusions can you find inner peace

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Virtue in the Storm

No great thing is created suddenly.

—Epictetus

A smooth sea never made a skilled sailor.

You've heard the expression you make your own luck. This is not a trivial statement. Rather, it shifts focus from a 'whatever happens, happens' attitude to one of preparation. It promotes long-term thinking.

You would not embark on a voyage across the Atlantic with a few days of supplies. You would research, review the map, plot a course, and leave an itinerary so that if something went wrong, someone would search for you. If you fall from the ballast, someone must be there holding the rope.

When you are faced with a choice, be careful. When you finally sight land, know that you may be perceiving this incorrectly – filtered through the mirage of what you want your eyes to see. Faulty perception and flawed judgement lead to errors in action. It is as if you are navigating a ship, using a broken compass on an outdated map. Worse still, you are misreading it. Both can trip you up on their own. Individually, both can produce a similar kind of mistaken result. There is, however, an important distinction: one is a mistake of omission, and the other of commission. Ignorance is excusable; vice is not, for the latter is always intention and far more treacherous. Taken together, ignorance compounds vice, and you lead yourself far off course.

A ship in the harbor is safe, but that's not what ships are for.^{[46](#)}

The fog clears and land is sighted on the horizon. You test and test again; this time, it's not a mirage. You are relieved that the ordeal is over, but also satisfied in a different way. Your trust in your senses, your judgment, your

actions, is restored. You can again navigate in these stormy waters, and sleep soundly knowing that you won't lead yourself astray.

Macedonia

I am indebted to my father for living, but to my teacher for living well.

—Alexander the Great

The waves of the wine-dark sea break thick across the bow, trailing a wake into the Mediterranean. The sails taught with wind and battered with rain, crack and billow before finding purchase.

How long to the harbor? You shout toward the ship's captain. We must be getting close.

You lean heavy on the railing, bracing against the bite of the rain stung on fresh skin already chilled by morning mist, itself, rising from the surface of the sea. The captain motions to the ship's port. Through the mist you can barely make out the coast, which finally reveals the shining port city of Pella, Macedonia.

We'll dock within the hour, the captain grumbles through his scraggly beard.

You nod to the captain. You think to yourself that there are two kinds of beards in the world, and that of the sailor and that of the philosopher. With this meaningless but amusing observation, you head below deck

You remove outermost cloak and hood, the traditional dress of the Greek philosopher. An oil lantern removes easily from its hook, on which you replace your heavy cloak. You lift the lantern to illuminate the narrow, worn passageway into the large underbelly of the ship. Supplies, mostly for trading fill the large room, except for a small table which is lit warmly but dimly by another hanging lantern.

You approach quietly, so as to not disturb the two figures deep in conversation. While the ship's captain keeps his map close above deck, these two men hold more arcane texts at hand in the shadow. You sit on the periphery, before the older of the two motions you closer.

Ah, Theophrastus, how is the captain, and by extension, our journey? The older man Xenocrates says to you. For never does it matter more to be in good favor then when you are not in sight of land. I was telling your misled master here how fallible our everyday experience is. Even now, our senses are distorted beyond recognition. The passage of time slows to a limp and space contracts as we are stranded in the underbelly of this beast!

Xenocrates thumps his fist against the curved wall, jostling the lantern and casting new sparks into the thick, damp air. They flare out harmlessly, peeling back the shadow on the younger man's nonetheless impressive beard and serious facial features.

I do not deny that the senses are fallible, Aristotle says slowly and clearly as a refined man of intense but friendly disposition. But, Aristotle continues, their utility far surpasses that of the alternative – an indefinable, mysterious spirit beyond this world. How can we observe what is, by definition, unobservable?

Although 10 years his junior, Aristotle was no less experienced in life – or in philosophy – than the Platonist Xenocrates. Their disagreement, a staple of conversation at this point, was due to a matter of upbringing and of allegiance. The older Xenocrates was raised in the tradition of Plato. But Aristotle knew Plato well – he was his old master, just as you are now his. And Aristotle's intellectual evolution, in opposition to and eventually moving beyond his master's views, have a familiar form. Eventually, through the

natural desire for freedom and originality, the student must surpass the master. This is true even in philosophy. Yet Aristotle's simple smile suggested a knowledge – or at least the desire for it yet unfulfilled – beyond that of crafting his own path. Indeed, every word of the philosopher your master Aristotle was necessary and unnecessarily complicated; the words burned to be spoken, and Aristotle was remiss if he deprived the world of those words. There was no choice in the matter. He was a lantern in the otherwise muddled dark that was the current state of philosophy: empty, confused, and useless. At only 40 years old, he already nearly surpassed Plato and his legacy.

You know my position on this matter already, you reply to Xenocrates curtly. And frankly, all of Greece would be grateful if both of you directed your conversation to more productive matters, which is, I realize, an impossibility.

Xenocrates was preparing his retort as you stood up to share the news.

The captain says we are nearly to Macedonia, you say. And for good reason, for a voyage to India could not resolve this conversation.

Aristotle rises and places his hand on your shoulder.

Theophrastus, your master says, philosophy is often dull, repetitive, and unproductive. It is much like life in this respect. But does not the dullest knife need the most sharpening? So of course our failing minds need more work than yours, which is yet young and agile. And so we are all the better for this kind of work, even if it leads nowhere.

Your master was not wrong, as he rarely proved to be.

Aristotle draws up his heavy cloak and follows you to the narrow stairwell that led above deck.

Aristotle stops and speaks to you, Theophrastus, pay no mind to Xenocrates. At this point, we are going through the same motions we always have,

and likely always will. Yes, what we say doesn't change from one encounter to the next (it is doubtful that either he or I will ever change our natures at this point) yet the way we engage, and the manner in which we express ourselves makes no small difference. Rather, it makes all the difference. That is the essential point, the activity of our lives, the life we have chosen.

Aristotle handed you your cloak and traded you it for the lantern

Yes, of course, you say. But should not Xenocrates accompany us above deck to meet the prince?

Aristotle glances back at Xenocrates, now sitting alone at the table.

No, he says, he has long since given up seeing for himself. He already knows what to expect. And regardless, it's doubtful that we will see the prince any time soon. In any case, know this much: this young man will be brash, arrogant and foolish. None of this should surprise you. Yet what you may not understand is the cunning of those who hold power. It is as I spoke of politics: that man is a social animal, and his difference from the other animals is in his participation in it. Society has grown so powerful that it precedes us, molds us, defines us far past our natural inclinations and propensities ever can. And the social is largely outside of our control. You already know this line of reasoning: the man who ignores society is either a little more than a beast or far greater than what we can recognize as human – a god. In Macedonia, I fear we may finally experience the latter.

Perhaps it was just the light of the lantern, but Aristotle's fine features had grown harsh in a way that they seldom did.

He speaks with conviction this time, the prince is dangerous not because he is a god, but because he believes he is – and most everyone in his kingdom does as well. And while Xenocrates can bear your objections – as just as they may well be – the prince will not.

Aristotle hands you back the lantern. Oh Theophrastus, he says, there is much more at play here than tutoring. Philosophy is about far more than merely the truth. But I've said too much – mind your tongue around the boy, and we will be back in Athens soon enough.

Aristotle dons his hood, ascends the steps to the trapdoor, and walks out into the morning fog peppered with rain.

The ship docks and the first footholds our legs find on solid ground rock as if they were waves. Aristotle has already hopped off the dock onto the beach. It's littered with jellyfish that washed ashore during the storm. You pay the captain the second half of the fare and wish him well. Xenocrates follows behind you, while your slaves begin unloading the ship.

A party bearing the royal seal is waiting for you at the dock with spare horses. You step forward and greet the most ornamentally adorned military man of the group, who also happens to be the youngest of the group. He dismounts his horse and bows deeply.

You must be Aristotle of Macedonia, he says, welcome home.

The man gestures and his soldiers begin loading an empty cart. You're puzzled. You had assumed Aristotle was an Athenian, especially given his position as successor to Plato, Athens' jewel. Yet, he was not active in public life, you now remember, despite his self-proclaimed love of politics. And now this military man says he is a Macedonian? Just how little did you really know of your master? You shrug the uncertainty aside and deal with the task at hand.

No, you respond, I am Theophrastus, student of Aristotle.

The man frowns, just as Aristotle climbs onto the dock from below, jellyfish in hand.

Ah! Aristotle exclaims, nodding quickly as he hands you the jellyfish with a smile, then wiping his hands to embrace the man. You must be the prince of Macedonia. Tell me, what do you know of marine life? Is it true, what they say, that the waters of Lesbos are richer than any man's purse?

No, the man says, I am Ptolemy Lagides, page to the court of King Phillip, who is expecting you. He steps back and stretches his hand out for the halter of a horse, which he offers to Aristotle. Smiling widely back at you, Aristotle bows. Aristotle steps forward to the horse. He stops suddenly, feigning annoyance with a characteristic wide smile.

Theophrastus, he says, don't just stand there, we can't go anywhere before you preserve this jellyfish.

You look down at the creature you hold in your hands, already coated thick with slime. Anything for you, Aristotle.

You and Aristotle clean off in the bathhouse, changing into the one set of fancy robes you own. Aristotle gives you a knowing glance as you assemble outside of the palace steps. He extends his hand out above an oak table, palm-downward and at hip height. It's well-made, with a cleanly cut face exposing the collective knots of thousands of years of tree life. Brow furrowed, Aristotle presses his palm against the surface of the sturdy table, feeling the physicality of the object below.

Ptolemy, page to King Phillip, returns in more formal attire, summoning Aristotle to the throne room. Aristotle nods quickly in affirmation, a nervous tic he exhibits often during lecture. (Aristotle often joked that composing words at length – speaking and writing – were unnatural activities that are foreign to all good men, except perhaps the legendary Demosthenes. If you forced the mind to focus and the body to sit still, both will eventually

rebel.)

Yet despite this quick nod, Aristotle was remarkably calm. He stood in the traditional Macedonian robes of the intellectual elite – bright colors layered over the traditional white. Perhaps this was more of a homecoming than you first thought.

When you die, Aristotle says loudly through the dense brush, his voice staccato'd between the swings of his axe clearing the trail ahead, will you continue on and be reborn, or dissolve into nothing but atoms? It could be that the world is like an onion and we keep peeling back the layers until we get sick of looking at them.⁴⁷ But even then, we should take it as far as it will go. Who know what we'll find along the way? Won't it be wonderful to find out?⁴⁸

Aristotle sights a clearing, and hacks at a large tree in its path. Following behind him, I work with Ptolemy Lagides to toss the debris off of the trail we forged. The prince Alexander walks behind still, not troubled by manual labour. Aristotle strikes the tree again at the base, felling it. The tree falls into the clearing with a heavy impact. What was a tree just moments ago is suddenly only wood. Aristotle steps into the clearing and motions for us to rest on the newly-felled log. He himself claims a boulder in the clearing.

This inherent desire to understand, Aristotle says, slightly out of breath, is an essential part of our nature. It is satisfying, in a way, to figure things out. Identifying patterns used to be related to our survival, but now we need a way to occupy our time. And this is the best way...perhaps the highest of our natural impulses. Pattern-seeking is something that is at once uniquely ours and universal in scope. So we should engage this desire more readily than any of the other desires. Of all the causes to action, reason stands alone;

supreme. But it is not disconnected from your feelings and body – it's a part of the same whole. Trust your body, listen to it, and it will lead you in the right direction when you feel frozen yourself. This is what Socrates and Plato, my teacher, did not understand: the link between mind and body and soul.

It was always a wonder to watch your master speak. He has a remarkable ability to compose in the moment, paragraphs unfolding and condensing in the very air. He knew all the myths and legends, both of the common folk, and in this case, the Greek elite. The story of Socrates standing all night, feet with droplets of dew frozen to them, was as much a picture of the philosophical life as anything else, now so in vogue for the Macedonian youth. It was as if his words expanded to fill the space of whatever room he happened to find himself in. And if that space-to-fill were nature, they grew evermore.

The prince Alexander rose from the log to respond to his new tutor, an expression of excellent manners that carried over from the King's court. Perhaps expecting this objection, Aristotle rose to meet him just as quickly. They stood alone in the clearing, the gravity of the situation reflected in their dual solitary stances.

It is well-known at this point, the prince objects, that Socrates did not spend the night in the field. And, if anything, his feet hardly froze to the ground.

Aristotle smiles and speaks more softly than before, switching from statement to the questioning style of elenchus.

I was not there, he says. I was not even born. And neither was your father, so needless to say, you were not yet conceived.

Aristotle was treating the prince disrespectfully so far. It had to be on

purpose, but you could discern no good reason. You wince, but Aristotle continues on unperturbed.

No, he says, neither of our eyes bear witness to this event. There is no other way to dispute a fact, except through observation. As much as I would like to discredit Socrates, it can't be done in this way. Either you must see it for yourself, or postulate its truth and leave it alone (barring the discovery of disproof later). Besides, there are more fruitful avenues to attack an enemy of the mind than fact alone. Unless, of course, you would rather dispute the veracity of Achilles' armor, dipped in solution as a child save for his left ankle? I myself doubt that legend sometimes. I am more inclined to think that he was not a demigod, and that titles such as those only follow expressions of skill. It is the cultivation of an image, which, as Socrates says in his *Republic*, is the basis of deception, and the beginnings of cult. So while the titles are earned and justified, they are nonetheless false. It is the image itself that creates and maintains its own power; in reality – in actuality – it contains little. This you know already. What say you?

Aristotle reclaims his place on the rock, signaling the end of his reply and forfeiting any potential further retort. To the onlookers, Aristotle's reply was borderline treasonous. Yet, you yourself understood how important it was for Aristotle to establish early the nature of their relationship to his new pupil. Aristotle is insolent, in a way, and those who do not yet know him sometimes need to be taught that he cannot be easily broken. Aristotle's temperament is much like that of a horse's – no, better yet, Plato's chariot: guided at once by the dual steeds of passion and reason, letting either dictate when the situation demands it, yet barreling ever forward.

Alexander, still standing, is noticeably taken aback. He must not be used to anyone challenging him, and especially not on the pretenses of such a

trivial argument. Yet he was not dull, and understood exactly what Aristotle was getting at. He formulated an extensive reply, but swallowed it, opting instead for the simply retort.

No, Alexander says, of course not. To deny Achilles his status, and the events of the rest of the *Iliad*, would be sacrilege, the penalties for which are severe. And I would not expect those who do not share such a title to understand it.

Despite the obvious insult, Aristotle simply nods, smiles, and returns to his feet.

Good, he says, onward.

I was still catching my breath, and somehow my aging master was ready to go. I caught the eye of Ptolemy, the military man of excellent physical constitution, who was similarly winded. Much older than young Alexander, nearly your age, he smiled knowingly. This will be interesting.

We all huddle in the brush, legs stiff from crouching. With caution, I rise slowly. Securing as good of a foothold I can get without rustling the brush, I pull the bow's thick line taught. I feel my back twist with strong torsion. This is my heaviest bow, and it's not meant for target practice.

The deer was a moderately-sized buck, antlers flecked with receding velvet. It knew that you were there, how it looked right at you with clear eyes. It always surprised you how wide their eyes were set, sitting almost near their ears. Yet, the buck is not alarmed by your presence. If anything, it's intrigued. It stares at you, chewing side-to-side in that impossible way only deer can chew, before bending down to graze again.

You draw the line back to the corner of your mouth, close your left eye, and hold your breath. You let go.

The bow cracks lightning and the arrow swims through fog and flesh and bone. The impact knocks the buck over, and he scrambles back to his feet. But your shot hits true, dealing massive damage to the back and lower torso, and damaging or severing nerves that connect the lower half of his body to the rest. The buck's back legs spasm wildly, then go limp and, no longer able to support his body, his thin legs crumple beneath him. He throws his body weight around, doing what little he can to roll, all while kicking and stamping his front legs in the dirt, now mixed with blood and shit and guts.

Aristotle sprints to the deer with surprising speed, considering how his civilian sandals flop underfoot. I follow behind him best I can, tossing the bow down and readying the coils of rope that rest on my right shoulder. You work quickly with him, pulling lengths of rope taught across the animal, standing on the slack while hammering stakes in the ground. Your experience as a seaman is of great help as you fasten the rope to the stakes, effectively pinning the neck of the deer – the most dangerous part of the animal – taught against the ground. With its neck secured firmly, its antlers would no longer be a problem, and it suddenly had a lot less weight to throw around as the neck is normally quite flexible.

Rather than approach the legs of the animal (a surefire way to lose a tooth), you perform a similar procedure, drawing ropes under the legs and fastening a loose knot, which you can tighten all the way to bind the legs together. The deer could still flex its legs and kick, but only in a linear motion, and never upwards. Given this, Aristotle safely approaches it from behind, feeling the neck and examining the wound of the animal for but a moment.

Sensing it was secure for a moment, Aristotle stands and wipes his bloody

hands down the length of his philosopher's cloak.

Excellent shot Theophrastus, he spoke, you've crippled it precisely. Aristotle looks away from you and scans the area, finding Alexander still crouched in the brush. He shouts out to the prince and beckons him closer.

Alexander stands up and approaches the kicking buck slowly. You could see in the light of the clearing that his face was pale, drained of blood. He walks with an uncharacteristic heaviness. You glance at Aristotle who quickly returns it before beckoning again to the boy. It becomes obvious to you that Alexander had hardly seen blood before, let alone hunt or kill.

This, Aristotle says, is a fallow deer. Knowing the name of animal, however, means little.

He motions to me and I provide him with my knife as he squats near the animal. Aristotle begins to point with the blade, steadying the deer with his other hand flat on the side of its neck. Oddly, the touch calms the beast. Aristotle scrapes the knife against the antlers, shaving off some of the velveteen growth. He collects it in his palm and passes the shavings to Alexander.

Only male deer have antlers, Aristotle says, and they must regrow them each and every year. This velvet is a rarity, however, as it is only present as the antlers grow – a short period each spring. Indeed, this impressive rack of solid bone is the fastest growing in the animal kingdom. And this huge nutritional deficit is still profitable for males. It's all about sex appeal, and the largest antlers win the most fights and reproduce with the healthiest females. So quick-growing antlers are absolutely essential if you want to bear children, and this velvet is the key. It provide lots of surface area and cavities for air exchange and for new growth to latch onto. Nutrients funnel through the live bone to the growing surface. And once the antlers are done

growing, the bone dies and hardens, coming to resemble what we are more familiar with. As these antlers are still growing, they are sensitive to the touch. As a buck regrows his set of antlers each year, they must fall off at some point. Indeed, antlers are often found amid the winter snow. Of supreme interest is that each year, a buck grows a new point on each antler. I don't know the reason for this, but it allows us to work out its age by the number of points. This one is likely nine or ten years, because antlers don't grow the first year of life. So using antlers will only work for adult males, not women or newborns. The more certain way to age any deer is by the wear on its teeth, but if you are keen on keeping your fingers I wouldn't suggest try it on a live animal.

At this point, the deer is remarkably calm except for a nervous upward-facing eye and the occasional snort. He has stopped kicking, but as Alexander, feeling more comfortable now, approaches, it begins to kick again. Alexander jumps backward and circles around the deer to approach it correctly. With all four of us now assembled behind the deer's spine, Aristotle focuses our attention on the wound.

It hasn't completely severed the spine, he says, but close. The point where the quadriceps muscles attach to the femur has suffered serious damage. This deer certainly will not walk again, and it is likely preparing for death.

Grabbing its antler, you tilt the head upward. The deer resists but can do little. The eye that faces skyward had lost some of the clarity that you saw earlier, even from the brush. It now looks slightly glossy, if not cloudy.

While this deer will die here within the hour, Aristotle says, an excellent shot has leant us a wonderful opportunity to study the body near death. Alexander, begin to clean the wound and I will guide you.

Aristotle brushes the knife's blade on his robe and offers the handle in

the traditional supplicant position. Alexander accepts it but hesitates again. He doesn't know how to proceed, but Aristotle meets his eyes and nods in encouragement. The prince places his free hand on the bloodied but otherwise whole abdomen. He carefully positions the point of the knife at an angle near the base of the arrow. He presses downward slowly, and in a prying motion, wiggles the broken shaft upward. This causes the deer much pain. As it stirs, Aristotle shuffles to its head and feels its neck. Pressing its antlers against the ground to steady the animal's head, Aristotle examined its eyes.

More quickly now, he said to Alexander.

Glancing away from his work to his tutor for a moment, Alexander pauses. At that moment, the blade slips from the arrow shaft into the flesh of the beast. It screams (deer are remarkably humanlike in this capacity for vocalization) and kicks wildly with its front legs. Aristotle recoils as the buck whips its neck against the ropes. Aristotle reclaims his grasp of the antlers and presses its head into the earth again.

We're not pulling teeth here, Aristotle says to the prince, growing impatient. Remove as much of the arrow as you can and get out of there.

Ptolmey casts his eyes downward and shakes his head; he has seen enough of the battlefield to know that the situation was growing dire for the animal.

Frustrated, Alexander continues to fumble with the knife, each potential incision met with discouraging screams and snarls. Alexander stops and stands, taking the knife with him. Aristotle motions for the knife, but Alexander holds it tight and crosses his arms.

This animal has suffered enough, the prince says. I won't continue.

A tense stillness falls on the forest, silent except for the pained breathing of the buck. Aristotle looks to Ptolemy and motions him over with a yank

of the head. Ptolemy produces a larger military knife and passes it to Aristotle, who trades him for his grip of the antlers. Ptolemy now calms the deer as Aristotle shuffles down to the animal's wound. He calls to you, and you hurriedly fetch your apothecary bag from the brush, digging for clean cloth you had lined before with Old Man's Beard lichen. As you return, Aristotle swiftly and fully plunges the blade into the flesh, cutting a clean circle around the arrow shaft. He grabs the wooden spear and jerks it sharply with force, taking some of the flesh with it. The wound begins to fill with blood, to which you immediately apply the treated cloth. With firm pressure, the flow stops, although the cloth is now nearly soaked. Although the deer was still in great pain, the treatment of the wound had now halted its loss of blood, and it regained a relative sense of composure. You expected a frustrated retort from Aristotle, but he said nothing. Rather, he pauses, and wipes the knife clean again. Surprisingly, Aristotle continues to teach.

In this situation, Aristotle says, loss of blood is the deadly factor in play. Theophrastus here has applied cloth to the wound, and although its absorption is minimal, the firm, constant pressure is what we're after. If this were a human, then the mossy herb my apprentice has selected would prevent infection. However, the loss of its hind legs makes a full recovery impossible. Were this wound a few inches lower and treated promptly – perhaps impossible without trapping it as we have, which, admittedly requires crippling it first – it would likely survive. Suffice to say that a human wounded in a similar manner would have a decent chance at walking away, if the haste is applied diligently.

Aristotle pauses and again examines the beast's eyes, antlers held back by Ptolemy.

Very good, he mumbles, nodding quickly. Now, Aristotle says, we will

try to examine the stomach of this ruminant at work. Come close Alexander, for a live subject is a rare thing indeed. When do you think it had its last meal?

Aristotle looks to confirm that Ptolemy had a good grip on the antlers, and he nods in approval. Aristotle then steadies himself and makes a quick but deep incision into the flesh of the live deer. It screams, writhing in great pain against its bonds. You look to Alexander who is considerably distraught at Aristotle's act of scientific mutilation. Aristotle, however, is composed and clinical, knowing precisely where he should go into the body of the deer and the secrets of natural life he hopes to glean from it. Despite the brutality of it all, Aristotle remains remarkably removed from the situation.

The scream of the deer was now all but constant, when it suddenly changed pitch rapidly and began wheezing irregular. Blood squirts out of the wound with force, and the heart now beat out of rhythm. The buck thrashes about and, were it not for Ptolemy's steady hands, it may have impaled you with an antler. It was close to death, and its struggle showed it. Its hind legs hang limp as its front press against the ground, digging desperate holes. It wheezes a horrible sound through its flooded windpipe, the scream of a child mixed with the dying lamentations of a soldier. That sound tapers off and is replaced with that of choking and snorting, until its whole body became as limp and useless as its wounded half.

You look at Alexander, who drops the knife he had used to cut the deer's throat. Aristotle begins to realize that the prince had sabotaged his experiment.

Aristotle stands and approaches Alexander, who stands his ground near the dead deer. With bloody hands, Aristotle lifts the chin of the prince

You have defied me, Aristotle speaks coldly. I should be angry. There is

always more to learn from nature, and suffering is necessary on the path to knowledge. But I am not angry. I realize now how strange my ways must seem to the initiated. How far I must go to achieve the ends that knowledge demands of me. If anything, you have reminded me of a simple truth often forgotten – how much the mind depends on the fragile sensations of the body. A little steel, a bit of poison, or even a few inches of water, and you are suddenly become but flesh. And I see that you may have been right, my lord.

Alexander appears to be taken aback – perhaps the first time Aristotle had spoken to him with respect. Alexander remains speechless for a long time.

Aristotle begins to turn away when the prince finally speaks

I was wrong to have doubted you, Alexander says. I myself have all the political power in the world, but you can mete out even life and death. Perhaps even you have the power to change minds, for you have changed mine. Forgive me, Aristotle, for I have much to learn.

Alexander bows to his tutor. Remarkably, Aristotle kneels and bows far deeper.

On the contrary, Aristotle says to the ground, I am here to learn from you, my lord. For you are not like other pupils of mine, that much I know already. For if you are Achilles, then I would be honored to be Patroclus.

Alexander signals that he could rise, and Aristotle did. He stands and bows quickly again before turning away from the prince. Alexander suddenly remembers his bloodied hands, and wipes them hastily them on his robes, as if the blood were somehow burning his flesh. Alexander motions to Ptolemy, and they walk away together to find water with which he can clean his bloodied hands.

Aristotle, however, could not care less about his own messy appearance.

He flashes you a smile, innocent yet arrogant, as always.

Very well, Aristotle say, Theophrastus, begin the autopsy.

Parts of the Whole

The whole is different than the sum of its parts.

—Aristotle⁴⁹

Einstein received a lot of fan mail. He possessed not only a brilliant rational mind, but also a deep sense of compassion. These disparate ‘sides’ of the brain stem from a common source: a desire to understand, a feeling for the workings of mind, and a sense of the patterns that permeate all of our actions and lives, just as the diverse organisms which fill the natural world to the point of bursting with life. Einstein had this fundamental wisdom in heaps, and that was what made him great. As his fame grew, people began to write him with personal issues. Surprisingly, his insight was wide and deep even when it came to consoling a father grieving over the loss of a child. Einstein writes that

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us ‘Universe,’ a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation, and a foundation for inner security.⁵⁰

There is little I can say beyond this beautiful passage, and nothing I can say better than is already written. But note how personal Einstein’s letter is, despite mentioning nothing about the actual situation. He does not negate the suffering that the father feels over the loss of his daughter. Nor does he offer advice. Through neglecting to talk about these aspects, Einstein *validates*

the father's pain. He gives space for grief but also reframes the emotion as a natural response, and not, vitally, the reality of the situation. Your grief is real, but it is no reason to suffer. Death can be sad, but it can never be horrible.

His words apply to every human, in a universal sense. His strategy for achieving freedom also depends on the three-part structure I have outlined: eliminating the 'delusion' of false judgment, accepting what you are faced with as the true and objective 'whole', and the 'striving' as the very act constitutive of a full life. Underlying these three principles are assumptions about the nature of humanity: as generally compassionate, as flawed, as necessarily imperfect, as creatures of action and of habit, as receptive to the beauty inherent in nature, as containing within themselves the ability to find peace and to create their own security.

Einstein at once reaffirms the father's suffering and its purpose, the value of his life and his deceased daughter's, and offers a path forward without negativity or harsh realism. He says: what you're feeling is okay, it's happening to you, and it's legitimate to feel the way you do. It even has a good, justified reason. You're acting in proportion to the gravity of the situation. Yet, contained within that reason are truths about this world that defy easy comprehension: that we are all part of the same world, but stuck in our own minds; that someday you will die, and leave this life you know behind. Through understanding, natural pain can be tempered with understanding. The size of the frame can be adjusted, to bring the picture into focus, revealing aspects that were hidden or obscured. On the above letter, Kabat-Zinn elaborates

We are separate...we do have particular thoughts and feelings and unique,

wonderful, love-filled relationships, and we suffer greatly and understandably when those bonds and connections are broken, especially when death comes to the young. But at the same time, is it not equally true that we are all here and gone in an instant, little eddies or whirlpools in a flowing current, waves briefly rising on an ocean of wholeness? As eddies and waves, our lives do have a certain uniqueness, but they are also the stuff of a larger whole expressing itself in ways that ultimately surpass our comprehension.⁵¹

Understanding in this way may feel unnatural, because it is – as animals, we are not used to thinking beyond what we can immediately see and feel. Our brains aren't wired that way, so it's difficult to try. We short circuit when we attempt to zoom out that far. It is vital to our happiness to rewire our own brains in such a way, in the same way that it is natural to suffer, but necessary to relieve it. And suffering ceases the precise moment it acquires meaning.⁵²

That meaning: to strive to improve your life and the life of others, to make the world even slightly better for your children, to extend empathy beyond your immediate acquaintances, to be part of the same whole. Aurelius writes

Keep reminding yourself of the way things are connected, of their relatedness. All things are implicated in one another and in sympathy with each other. This event is the consequence of some other one. Things push and pull on each other, and breathe together, and are one.⁵³

This is a simple concept, but deviously difficult to implement. At every moment, our selfish body will be resisting, trying to pull our minds back into the safety of panic and greed. But we've outgrown those impulses, and you don't need to listen to them if you don't want to. It takes practice, "a certain kind of *work* to achieve liberation from the prison of our own thought habits."⁵⁴

To hold both views in focus at once – insignificance and uniqueness – is as difficult as seeing with your eyes crossed. But the resulting image

is striking and clear.

Flex

Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless – like water. Now you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle. You put it into a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend.

—Bruce Lee⁵⁵

Note the exquisite detail of your fingertips – perfectly designed for precise manipulation and sensitive to the slightest touch.

Flex your hand.

Reach up and feel your hair. Trace it down to its roots, and feel your scalp with your fingertips. How strange, hair is. It is both dead and alive, at once a living part of you and little more than dead skin. Just as your fingertips are sensitive your hair is delicate.

So too is your head. Feel your temple, around past your ear, the bump on the back of your head right above your neck (this bump tells us we are but apes) and around to your other temple. Feel with both hands, meshing your fingers together. Can you touch your thumbs to both temples at once, with both of your hands still connected? This narrow circumference is the entirety of your experience. Your whole life is lived in what you can hold in two hands.

How delicate the careful union between brain and body, and how easily the brain can betray the eyes to lead us astray. Imagining threats in what are truly friends, seeing enemies in the dark – all proof of our imperfect perception. All of your thoughts, loves, successes and failures happen in what, only now you can clearly see, is but a small and delicate physical thing. Everything

you know depends on this simple, delicate ball of fat. If it gets too hot, you'll melt like an engine without oil, burning acrid smoke and your sinuses on the side of the road. Too cold and you'll grind to a stop, a flickering fire in the battering wind, running out of fuel. How precise the requirements for even the simplest forms of life. How distant we seem from those simple forms in our enormous complexity, and how more fragile we are because of it.

Our minds are advanced – designed to think rapidly about the barrage of images it's faced with. So of course these images can worry you: they're supposed to. But the very thing that makes our minds remarkable also makes us vulnerable. A mind this powerful has high requirements, and a tendency to make mistakes. Even the slightest deviation from a balanced body sends our mind into a panicked spiral. In truth, the mind is only loosely connected to the body, and you can train yourself to separate them further. You just need to readjust. If our bodies are on the knife's edge already, why do you keep pressing into the blade? Why do you resist the fact that the knife is there, rather than simply turning away? Instead, a missed lunch, or an early morning 'makes' us into the kind of person that we ourselves could not stand to deal with.

Man is but matter.⁵⁶

But it is not your stomach or your tired eyes that turns you into a child. You do that yourself. It is not the driver that cut you off that makes you angry, rather, you have done that yourself. Do not be perturbed by outside events. Only be concerned with what is within arm's reach – your actions; your treatment of others, however ungrateful; and all of this in the sliver of time allotted to you: not even your lifetime or this year or even today, but this fraction of a second – this present moment.

As your eyes now catch the light reflecting off of the shapes printed on the page, know realize the incredible fragility of focus. It shatters the moment you look away. With this constantly in mind, know that the limited realm of responsibility you hold for your actions and your actions alone carries immense responsibility – real responsibility in the truest sense – despite its narrow scope. To make matters worse, your eyes and desires and guilty pleasures deceive you, constantly threatening your judgement. But it is just a threat, so stick your heels in the mud until they find purchase and stand firm in defense against the oncoming threat. For it is always coming. And knowing all of these limitations should not discourage you, but rather spur you to stride ever faster toward the end, your goals, your purpose.

As you flex your hand, remember the fundamental principles you learned earlier. Remember what you repeated to yourself, the way to remember what you are working toward

Through drawing this division in my mind, I will separate the wheat from the chaff and safely discard that which I cannot control. With practice, I can train myself to recognize this more and more easily. Soon I will mold and temper my mind in such a way to accept the stresses and weights placed upon it. If I can make disciplining my judgement a habit, I will flex where previously I would have snapped. With practice, I will ride the waves of emotion that used to crash around me. I will forego uncertainty and excessive self-doubt for inner peace.⁵⁷

Just as you flex your hand, you will learn to flex your mind. The grooves and folds of skin that mark where your knuckles bend: they are there for a reason. Your hand is meant to bend this way. If you had never used your hand before, you would have to teach yourself to bend it that way. The grooves would form over time. It's impossible to bend it the other way, and if you try to, you will only end up frustrating yourself. Our minds are much the same way; if you're not used to using it without pain, you have to learn a new

technique. You have to identify the way it's supposed to work, and then teach yourself until it grows strong and forms new grooves and folds of its own. Think of the footpath worn through the grass: never by a few walkers (even if they tried) but by countless, repeating it again and again.

They say your brain rewires itself as you learn, changing its shape. You must do the same to yourself, to your character. Imagine the way your best version of yourself would act. How the most admirable mentor you can imagine, or what history's most legendary father figure would teach you. Hold that ideal in your mind and work toward it.

Do it now: through focusing on that which is in your power, at this precious moment, and in the best way you can, nothing more.

Yet don't be afraid to feel what your body or mind are telling you is happening, because it is and that can't be changed. But be deathly afraid to take it even one step further than that, to add on a judgement of what is good or bad, pleasant or desirable, as opposed to what simply is. Strive to keep the objective separate from everything else – the fallible and self-serving side of your subjective nature. In this manner you can bring your own mind in further alignment with the ideal of perfection it can picture, but never fully obtain

Everything derives from it – that universal mind – either as effect or consequence. The lion's jaws, the poisonous substances, and every harmful thing – from thorns to mud...are by-products of the good and beautiful. So don't look at them as alien to what you revere, but focus on the source that all things spring from.⁵⁸

So, too, are you made from the same stuff as any other thing. As far as the physical natures of people go, we are nearly identical. To be proud of meaningless differences that separates you from your brothers and sisters is not

only to split hairs, but to do so in a manner of inflated, useless self-importance and pretension. No one is proud of splitting hairs, yet you can't give up your sense of being unique – why? Because you fail to realize that we all spring from the same well, and soon we'll all flow back there, too.

Dis-ease (Mental Health)

Anxiety

Today I escaped from anxiety. Or no, I discarded it, because it was within me, in my own perceptions – not outside.

—Marcus Aurelius⁵⁹

There is a real danger in focusing too much on learning about techniques as opposed to implementing them. The goal of therapy aims to break the linguistic circle of reading-and-thinking, *ad infinitum*, and to prompt a shift toward action.

Those who experience anxiety know unpleasantness of thinking too much. An apt description of anxiety is one of ‘rumination’. Those with social anxiety may ruminate on what could go wrong in a social interaction, or endlessly repeat inconsequential events. Those with more generalized anxiety may ruminate about nearly anything. The word itself refers to the digestion method of large grazing animals (like cattle) that ferment cellulose by holding it in a special, extra stomach for a long period of time. Cattle must sleep standing up because the slurry of grass and digestive juices would otherwise spill into their other stomachs.

Not that cattle aren’t infinitely interesting, but the point is that rumination has a negative connotation, one of referring to the lower animals. That is, while humans are distinguished in our ability to pause and think through problems (as no one has ever seen a cow ponder), we are also responsible for *deciding*, that is, stopping thought and resuming action at an ap-

appropriate time. Ultimately, humans are distinguished by action in combination with thought, not either alone. And action without thought is worse than ignorance, for the base form of judgment is one of blindly trusting the desires and judgments of the body. This leads to consequences that you would not otherwise accept. The opposite is also true: Thought by itself moves nothing.⁶⁰

Treatment depends on honest and good judgment of oneself. A key factor is the recognition of your own anxiety-producing practices. You must find their root, which tends to be mental and verbal in origin.⁶¹ Problems can seem large when they are dealt with in an excessively verbal manner – anyone who has sat in on a bureaucratic meeting can attest to the damaging powers of bloated words. Rather, you will feel relief if you can develop your own techniques to break the verbal cycle. To get outside of your own head, so to speak. The techniques themselves vary based on the situation, but fundamental to all of them is correctly identifying that your recovery is within your own control, the acceptance that it may be difficult and a willingness to try in spite of this, and a responsibility to take your recovery into your own hands. Kabat-Zinn summarizes the importance of this disposition:

The deciding factor...is the willingness of the patient to try to do something for himself or herself to cope with some of the pain, particularly when it has not responded fully to medical treatment alone. People whose attitude is that they just want the doctor to ‘fix it’ or to ‘make it go away’ are not good candidates. They won’t understand the need to take some responsibility themselves for improving their condition. They might also take the suggestion that the mind can play a role in the control of their pain to mean that their pain is imaginary, that it is ‘all in their head’ in the first place.⁶²

The notion that pain is *real but mental* is crucial to the whole effort of recovery. This is not to deny that pain *feels* bad or can impact our lives. But it

to deny, firmly and absolutely, that we can do nothing about it. While we cannot outright ‘cure’ our mental ailments, we can minimize them to the point of nonexistence. Even more so, we can learn from them and grow into a stronger, more loving person than had we never experienced that kind of pain. In the end, any ailment ends up being an impetus to change, an opportunity for growth. But it is only an opportunity, one you have to actively take. The ailment itself is changed through this realization, just as you are changed by the ailment, and changed again by acceptance of the ailment: in all three cases, suffering ceases the moment it acquires meaning.⁶³ You may find that the pain itself lessens once you stop fixating on it. (This was certainly my experience.) Instead, a positive outlook actually and physically makes your situation easier to bear. The key is to direct your energy toward other activities, almost as if you are distracting your mind, long enough to show yourself that you can think about other things besides an unpleasant situation. And once you begin to think that, it will become easier and easier to distract yourself until you no longer feel compelled to think of the pain as a hindrance.

Mental health treatment must be viewed as an ongoing *process* of change, not merely just a cure delivered to an otherwise static patient. As patients, we often want doctors to change our bodies in order to relieve our minds. But relief often only comes from the opposite: we must make up our minds, and then our bodies will follow. Doctor’s simply won’t say this, because it defies their job description, and the ideal we hold of them. It is a matter of shifting the locus of control from an external antidote to an internal one already contained within your mind. Realize truly what is within your control, and what is without. Here especially, be patient as you learn to accept these things. You will feel frustrated. Things you wish you could be

now, ideas yet unfulfilled, shapes you can see the outlines of but never materialize, a thought you grasp for only a moment before it disappears and is replaced by the nagging pain of knowing that you've forgotten. This is frustration. But you can teach yourself not to accept frustration and work through it. You can cultivate the muscle of patience and understanding, through forgoing false judgments in favor of reality and all its flaws. This is because, "the value of attentiveness varies in proportion to its object. You're better off not giving the small things more time than they deserve."⁶⁴ And the pain you feel is outside of your control, and thus not something worth focusing on.⁶⁵

Obsession

When your mind becomes obsessed with anything, you will filter everything else out and find that thing everywhere.

—P;⁶⁶

You can't change the fact that this obsession exists. For you, it's real. Don't waste energy denying that.

But you can modulate your response.

This is the problem I felt most acutely. I developed irrational fears about things that never used to bother me. I knew they were irrational but I couldn't stop. That was the worst of all.

I became fixated on ways I might accidentally or intentionally hurt myself. I was afraid that I *might* hurt myself. Through that fear, I became afraid that I *might want* to hurt myself. This fear grew and I ended up causing my-

self a lot of emotional suffering. My fear of suffering directly caused my suffering, because I was stuck in certain mental feedback loops. It is illogical, ironic, and borderline insane. But through simply feeling fear, worrying about fear, and worrying about worrying about fear, I spiraled downward and watched as I let my obsessions begin to impact my daily life. (This happens to be a good litmus test for looking more objectively at the state of your own problems – to what extent do your problems impact your life on a daily and long-term basis?)

I developed an irrational fear of knives, scissors, heights, and driving. I knew it was ridiculous – I had no intention of ever hurting myself – but in spite of this knowledge I could not stop worrying that one day I might. If any of those situations presented themselves, I froze. If I was cooking in the kitchen, I was watching the knives. I would sweat constantly, my heart stuttering as I walked up a tall staircase for fear that this time I would lose control entirely, have a mental breakdown, and throw myself off.

These obsessions carried over into my personal relationships. It became difficult to drive to see my friends. I became worried about trivial matters, like small sums of money or arguments with strangers on the Internet. These were ways that I could express my desire for control, in however small a way. I was so afraid of losing control that I lost it. Now, I am at peace with the fact that much is outside of my control.

So believe me when I say even some of your own thoughts are outside of your control. That's a horrible feeling – to lose control of yourself. But it is manageable, I promise. Don't get discouraged, "Don't let your imagination be crushed by life as a whole. Don't try to picture everything bad that could possibly happen. Stick with the situation at hand, and ask, 'Why is this so unbearable? Why can't I endure it?' You'll be embarrassed to answer."⁶⁷ Take

that feeling of embarrassment, and focus on that. Laugh at how strange your mind works, how silly sometimes you are. Don't invalidate the way that you feel or the things that grab your attention. But see the humor in it, and take them for that they are worth. How things that seemed urgent a moment ago now don't make much sense.

Depression

If you look for the light, you can often find it. But if you look for the dark, that is all you will ever see.

—Iroh⁶⁸

Depression is the inability to imagine a future.⁶⁹ It is the assumption that your current mental state will continue indefinitely, and that such a continuation would be bad. Why would it be bad? Because your current mental state feels unpleasant, you don't want it to continue. It would be bad because it is bad to have your current feeling continue indefinitely. It is a vicious feedback-loop. It is illogical. But, it is nonetheless real.

Depression can occur by itself or in tandem with other conditions. Often, more fundamental problems such as anxiety, phobias, or other chronic conditions wear you down. They may weaken your overall health, and leave you more susceptible to other things: difficulty sleeping, worsening eating habits, weakened immune system, etc. It is often in situations like this that one can begin to feel discouraged. And that is the breeding ground for depression, a capstone added on top of your health problems when your back was already strained. You didn't ask for this, but you have to face it nonetheless. If you begin to feel depressed for other reasons, you obviously have to

deal with the root problem. Learning to handle your anxiety or OCD can take the edge off of growing depression before it becomes a full-blown problem.

That said, depression can have no other illnesses exacerbating it. It may seem that there is no physical reason for it; this may be true. In that case, it is important to get help. It could be as simple as not getting enough vitamin D, or it may be an issue that needs to be talked through. The only way you can know is if you get help. But in *any* case, reasonable or unreasonable, physical or mental, you can construct your own sense of meaning in your life. This meaning can be anything you can think of. And having some sort of focus, even if it appears simple or is just a hobby, will always make your condition easier to bear. And before you know it, you'll feel much better.

Chronic conditions

Nothing but what you get from first impressions. That someone has insulted you, for instance. That – but not that it's done you any harm. The fact that my son is sick – that I can see. But 'that he might die of it,' no. Stick with first impressions. Don't extrapolate. And nothing can happen to you.

—Marcus Aurelius²⁰

It's important to stay positive, and it is always possible to do so. Those words mean little by themselves. But behind them is a deep truth relevant to all of our lives. Living is painful, and often for no good reason. But life in itself is reason enough to keep going – it is always worth it, and it is always possible to believe as much, if you choose.

Take every step you can to improve your overall well-being. Any positive

change you make will also have effects on your ailment. There is no reason *for* your pain; it is random, or unlucky, or unforeseeable. But there is always a reason *to* endure pain. It acquires meaning when you choose to endure it. For pain only becomes suffering when you cease to endure it. That word is important; it is active, it is everlasting, it is optimistic. It says that you have within you a willpower that you can always stretch further than before, and always replenish quicker than last time. It may not get better, but it will get easier.

Despite your ailment, you will wake up every day with determination, energy, and hope. It may not feel like it now, but it will. To wake up every day and face a new set of challenges is wonderful. You just happen to have more challenges than some people. But you also have less than other people, and for that you should be thankful. There was no way to know where you would end up on the random spectrum of what life has dealt us. And even now, although things may seem bad, there's no way to know where you'll end up. Won't it be interesting to find out.²¹

It may end as quickly as it began, or not at all. It could stop and come back. But the answer in every case is the same: do the best you can. Don't let yourself get discouraged by a lack of external progress, for the only progress that matters is internal.

Often these kind of things are what you have to learn to live with. And when you finally feel defeated and are about to give up, you resign to the fact that this is something you will have to get used to. You will just have to deal with it, and make the best of it. Then, at that precise moment, it passes. Paradoxically, when you stop trying to get rid of it, it disappears. This is something that requires suffering to realize. You have to go through it to understand: it didn't go away. It's still there. Only, now, it doesn't bother you.

What you did instead was learn that it doesn't need to bother you. You learned how to get around, despite the obstacles. Only by fully and honestly submitting to the reality of the situation can you come to live with it in the best way possible.

Recovery

Pain is neither unbearable nor unending, as long as you keep in mind its limits and don't magnify them in your imagination.

—Marcus Aurelius⁷²

A positive attitude is integral to your recovery. What if what was holding you back this entire time, preventing your recovery, was your negativity? What if just by changing your mindset – which is always within your power – you can change your life? Then you have nothing left to fear. Often, paradoxically, it is our behaviors that sustain our illnesses. Like the addict who realizes his deteriorating condition and wants to change, but lacks the resolve to do so yet. Perhaps that addict is used to feeling this way. Perhaps he has come up with behaviors that no longer give him comfort, but are simply familiar. And so the addict continues, not because he enjoys it anymore, but because he's frightened of change. As Aurelius says

Frightened of change? But what can exist without it? What's closer to nature's heart? Can you take a hot bath and leave the firewood as it was? Eat food without transforming it? Can any vital process take place without something being changed? Can't you see? It's the same with you – and just as vital to nature.⁷³

As difficult as it may be, you need to want to change. What you want to

do is suspend the doubts of your mind for long enough to act positively. Action has great positive changes on the body; this much is well known. If you change your physical state, if you achieve a basic state of physical health and activity, your mind will follow. And if you change your mental state, it will be easier to change your physical state in the future. And then you know how it works, and that it can be done, and it becomes much, much easier.

This takes time. Be patient with yourself. There will be times when it feels hopeless, when the pain is unbearable. When it would be easier to return to your old ways. This is good! It shows that your body is resisting the changes you are trying to implement. This means that you are close to overcoming the body's resistance. Feel the pain (don't deny that it's there) but don't give into it fully. "Unendurable pain brings its own end with it. Chronic pain is always endurable: the intelligence maintains serenity by cutting itself off from the body, the mind remains undiminished. And the parts that pain affects – let them speak for themselves, if they can."⁷⁴ Maintain control of your mind despite the pain – always keep a bit of yourself pulled back a bit to watch what's happening to yourself. Just watch.

Through this act of self-observation (metacognition) your pain will lessen as you come to understand yourself better. You will reinforce a self-imposed divide between body and mind, one that nature would rather do away with, reducing you to little more than an animal. But as anyone who can endure great pain can tell you, the body cannot rule the mind; they should never converge to the same entity.

Do not hesitate to ask for help; for your worries about appearing burdensome are a just another internal barrier you have erected to bar your own recovery. You are far more conscious of your own faults in this regard than anyone else – it is just as likely that those close to you want to help, but don't

know how or are afraid to ask. It is your responsibility to ask for help, and you will be floored by the support that you receive. The stigma surrounding mental health issues is already disappearing rapidly, and what little that remains is mostly imaginary. Your problems, however, are real, and any barrier to your recovery must be overcome. Any stigma is then useless or illusory, and can be safely ignored. Do not be afraid; everyone you could possibly encounter during your recovery wants nothing more than for you to succeed.

Do not be discouraged if progress is slow. As Hemingway says, “The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong in the broken places. But those that will not break it kills.”²⁵ It is okay to be broken, for you will always heal stronger. And to break in some areas and recover is infinitely better than the alternative. I want everyone to become strong at the broken places, and I hope that this book will help you in some way. But these words are no substitute for serious medical help, if that is what you require. So please, ask for help when you need it, because there are some things that are outside of your control.

In the end, you will find yourself stronger than had you never faced any difficulties. You will look at yourself and be proud of who you became. And you would do it all over again if given the chance. Because if you didn't, you wouldn't have learned anything. You wouldn't be as strong as you already are now, or nearly as strong as you will become. It will all be worth it. Always.

Friends and Family

We must not force crops from rich fields, for an unbroken course of heavy crops will soon exhaust their fertility, and so also the liveliness of our minds will be destroyed by unceasing labour, but they will recover their strength after a short period of rest and relief: for continuous toil produces a sort of numbness and sluggishness.

—Seneca, On Peace of Mind

There is a constant tension between asking those close to you for help and remaining silent. You need support more than anything, but it can be impossible to communicate something you don't fully understand or even accept yourself – so how is anyone else supposed to? And that feeling of burdening those close to you never quite goes away. But I have been on both sides of that emotional support system, and I can guarantee you that there's nothing they would rather do than help you. So please reach out to them. It will be as relieving for them to help you as it will be for you.

If you know someone who is struggling, you must understand they are already beyond frustrated *with themselves*. They already feel immense lot of guilt, shame, embarrassment, and helplessness. Constantly they feel as if they are a burden. So you must take great care to not add to this weight.

Also recognize that they express this internal frustration outward, and often to those closest to them. So take any negativity they express with reservation, for surely it does not reflect upon you and your actions. Even if you treat them with nothing but kindness, you will inevitably receive responses from them that are unwarrantedly negative – from your perspective. If only they could see that things aren't as bad as they're making it out to be. From theirs, the world is drained of its color, and *you* would have to be blind to

not see it. Keep that in mind.

If this happens, reflect that you have far more perspective, willpower, and patience than they do in their current state. Don't criticize their behavior, which is a direct representation of their mental state, which they have little control over (at this moment in time). To criticize any of this – to express your frustration or empathy or pity for their sorry state – is to further degrade their already minimal self-worth. You may feel frustrated that they can't exit their slump. But surely they feel this same frustration ten times more strongly. It's not that they don't see it, it's that they *feel* powerless to do anything about it. It is a compulsion, a necessity. And an unfortunate byproduct of that is you will have to shoulder some unpleasant encounters, reassurance, and complicated or otherwise stressful situations. Be patient, for your patience is one thing you *can* do to help.

Don't take how they treat you personally; they may feel so trapped that they likely don't have much else they can do other than lash out at you in this way. Remember that your willpower goes ten times as far as theirs. In their state, it is almost as if they are a different person.

With your support, they will emerge stronger than they were going into the ordeal. And when they come through the other end – and they always will – they, with their newfound perspective, will be incredibly thankful for how you helped them. The previous feelings of guilt and shame will be replaced with only love. The sense of burdening one another fades, instead replaced by an image of the posts of a new foundation: what weight would crack one alone is effortlessly supported by multiple. While similar things would be crushing alone, they are that much easier to bear when we rely on each other. It will be because of you they succeeded, and they, too, will help you to succeed. That is what a meaningful relationship is, and it is perhaps

the strongest thing there is.

Exhale

The Mindfulness Revival

Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom.

—Viktor Frankl

Jon Kabat-Zinn grew tired of the world of medicine and turned to Buddhism. Kabat-Zinn realized that it wasn't a choice he had to make. In the 1970s, Kabat-Zinn began a holistic health practice, and mindfulness emerged grew from of its roots in both Buddhism and scientifically-supported therapeutic practice. Literature abounds, validating mindfulness' claims that mental practices of focus can stimulate, simulate, and support the body and the mind. Mindfulness is now found to be effective for dealing with anxiety, depression, chronic pain, and even daily stress. Indeed, Kabat-Zinn's teachings of mindfulness are now a recognized treatment for a list of numerous psychiatric disorders. Mindfulness has since expanded from its use from a medicine only for the sick to a lifestyle practice for everyone. The mental supports the physical. Philosophy, too, has long been concerned with the idea of a mental practice, especially one of with such a wide range of applications. Indeed, everyone and can benefit from strengthening their own mind.

Mindfulness was how I came to take my own treatment seriously. A desire to understand its techniques and the workings of my own mind, drew me into philosophy proper. But any trace of philosophy in mindfulness is (at first) hidden from view. Nonetheless, mindfulness is an important first step

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– a worthy catalyst to a world of concepts integral to self-care. This is perhaps because physicians consider it extraneous for patients to understand exactly what’s going on in their treatment. The medical ethic is concerned with results, whereas personal change will always be focused on the process itself. This disconnect causes much disillusion with the idea of treatment.

In my experience, this understanding was vital to my recovery from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Struggling to find relief from intrusive thoughts, I had to understand how and why my mind was malfunctioning. For this, I turned to Stoicism and sought to work on understanding my mind. As I came to learn more about myself and my tendencies to worry and unjustly extrapolate, my mind calmed. With this understanding, my body soon followed, relaxing from the self-induced panic of anxiety. Through my own active practice of mindfulness, I learned to limit the activity of my anxious mind.

In a similar vein, I have written this to introduce numerous mental techniques – ready to use and easily grasped by the intuition. If you find a specific techniques effective, I encourage you to explore the material at the end of the book to gain a deeper understanding, and a path going forward. But to get any kind of results, understanding the techniques is not enough – you actually have to put in the effort and implement them.

In earnest, now, mindfulness is a conscious practice of resting in an active awareness of your own mind and its place in the present moment. There is a constant tension between the activity of ‘focusing’, and the goal of ‘resting’. Indeed, ‘focus’ is an active thing, while ‘rest’ is necessarily passive. If you have ever *tried* to fall asleep, you intuitively understand it is impossible to. Rather, sleep comes only with the acceptance that it cannot be forced. The intent to go to sleep at night is active and conscious, but the activity itself of

falling asleep is necessarily passive. Thus, when I say that the activity of mindfulness cannot be forced, it is not at all inconsistent with an intention to be mindful.

The practice of mindfulness is as follows: at any moment in your daily life, remark on the fact of your life, at this unique moment in time and space. Your body occupies the floor in front of the kitchen sink. Your sleeves are rolled up and your hands run cold with water as you wash the dishes. A simple pause accompanies your thought: that *you are here now, thinking in this precise moment*. Then, as if you stepped outside of your body for a moment and were able to turn around watch yourself, a new thought cascades. This new thought is even shorter. The period of time that this thought – the *realization* that you were thinking about thinking – is but an instantaneous blip, an impossibly small fraction of your consciousness. Yet this second thought is the valuable one: the realization that you are *now* observing your own mind, in a manner different from merely a moment ago. A more reflective act of metacognition. The practice of mindfulness is one of realizing that you *were* thinking, and letting that thought go. It is the space between thoughts – miniscule, transitory, and necessarily impermanent. It is here where you step outside of yourself for a moment. In that tiny space rests the kernel of inner peace, the space between knowing and not knowing. This is a space you can retreat to when you are overwhelmed. To rejuvenate yourself, if only for a moment. And you can take yourself there.

Attitudes

Simply put, mindfulness is moment to moment non-judgmental awareness.

—Jon Kabat-Zinn⁷⁶

The following list appears in Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Full Catastrophe Living*.⁷⁷ Since then, it has taken on a life of its own for many people. I have repurposed it to reflect the philosophical disciplines we have explored together so far, and to draw out the connections between mindfulness and philosophy. The seven attitudes of mindfulness are:

1. Non-judging

To realize that nothing external to you is good or bad in itself; your thoughts make it so.⁷⁸ To understand that your mind, and therefore your character, is dyed by the color of these judgments,⁷⁹ which only obscure your vision further. To practice the discipline of judgment both intellectually and in action, and without indulgence. To be both the judge and jury of your own mind: impartial, rational, reasonable, and not easily swayed. (And to never become your own executioner). To simply notice your thoughts as they occur, to watch them grow and decay and fade away. To not resist the way the mind naturally changes. To observe your tendency to categorize objective things according to your disposition or objectives. To reject this extra, unnatural step of judgment; to straighten out these deviations from neutral perception.

2. Patience

To recognize that what you feel now is temporary; your state of mind, like all things, will soon pass, to be replaced by other feelings as diverse as the

trees that fill the forest. To know this, and to focus on the forest through the trees. To face difficult, boring, or aggravating situations with an upright posture, and a calm smile. To surrender up your need to control external things. To be satisfied, instead, with the control you have over your perception of those same externals. To recognize the uniqueness of this moment, its value not immediately apparent to your conscious mind. To trust that you will be alright.

3. Beginner's Mind

To forgo assumption and prejudice, which lead to error. To approach familiar situations as if they were new, and to approach novel situations as well with a measured, careful optimism. To be a child for as far as you can go – the caution, the uncertainty, yes, but also the good will and youthful energy of a child.^{[80](#)}

4. Trust

To cultivate in yourself a trust directed inward which, through practice, radiates outward to affect everyone in your life, a calm confidence exuding from your conscious mind to steady its unconscious parts, and your body. To live without fear. To not lament your current state or mistakenly assume it will continue (it will only continue if you keep up this negativity). To never lose this careful optimism, especially when you are ‘wronged’, for they who have ‘wronged’ you have only done wrong to themselves. You would be wrong to take *their* mistakes personally, and it would be worse than self-sabotage to let their behavior affect yours. To avoid this easy mistake. To trust yourself instead. To let the accumulation of your own practice and experience – with situations far worse than this – set you at ease.

5. Non-striving

To recognize that often the best way to accomplish something is to stop trying for a moment. That backing off the gas will allow you to get your bearings, to see what the task at hand actually requires, and to improve your course of action going forward. And if there is no clear goal – if the task itself is reward enough – then it becomes even simpler! To throw yourself into your work, to trust that this will always be enough, and to withhold and expectations in regard to outcomes. To focus instead on the effort and the focus you put into the *process* every day, whatever may come from it. To realize that focused work is the impetus to achievement, not vice versa. To be honest with yourself, your potential, and your current state. To feel whatever you are feeling, and to respond accordingly. To deny frustration as relevant to what you need to do *now* – to instead take stock of your strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for action in the present moment. To act calmly and firmly according to your best judgment and clearest perceptions. And to be satisfied with only that.

6. Acceptance

To not waste any mental energy resisting your perceptions. You are in pain, and that's okay, there is nothing more to it than that. To not exacerbate your problems by attaching this or that judgment to this or that fact. (How tiring!) To not deny that you feel a certain way, but to accept the feeling and refocus your energy in a different direction. To rest in the simple pleasure of existence.

7. Letting Go

To realize that the world is a certain way and you can't change it. To accept this. To realize that your desires *can* be changed. To let go of your desire that the world should be other than it already is. To actively accept what is happening, and to deal with it accordingly. To be aware of the judgments we

typically attach the ordinary situations, like standing in line, and to let them pass. To watch each thought drift downstream into the focus of your mind, to notice it without perturbing its path, and to watch it float away before you are suddenly distracted by a new thought that enters your vision. To watch all of your thoughts, pleasant or distressing, with this patient and flexible focus, cascading endlessly. A stream sliding across a bed of smooth pebbles. To exhale the stress and tension of every moment with each breath, and to leave it all behind each night. You'll need the space to carry more positive thoughts tomorrow, anyway.

Stoicism, Revived

The need for this sort of insight seems to be universal.

—Massimo Pigliucci⁸¹

Taken as a complete set, the seven attitudes of mindfulness mirror the thought process of Stoic philosophy. Non-judging and beginner's mind correspond to the Discipline of Judgment. Patience, trust, and non-striving relate to the Discipline of Assent. Acceptance and letting go lend themselves to the Discipline of Action.⁸² More fundamentally, the Stoic Principles of Control and Indifference echo throughout aspects of all seven attitudes of mindfulness.⁸³ A surprising link can be traced between Stoicism and Mindfulness.

This connection is likely a matter of inheritance and globalization, especially given the continued success of both Stoicism and Buddhism throughout history. I would not be surprised if Aurelius learned much from Buddhists during his conquests throughout Asia. Since then, Stoicism has

spread and preserved itself through Christianity; Buddhism has been revived in the Western world through mindfulness practices. The continued devotion alone to both Stoicism and Buddhism after thousands of years is evidence of its success. Yet even more striking is in their common roots: both ‘schools’ forming in Eurasia within a few hundred years.⁸⁴ Crucially, this was a time of great political and social turmoil.

This subject deserves further exploration,⁸⁵ but the link between times of suffering and the techniques held common between all of history’s great therapeutic practices is difficult to ignore. When the world demands too much of us, the human response has been remarkably consistent: one of focused, rational opposition to adversity. Call it philosophy, or mindfulness, or religion, there is something beautiful in the universality of their teachings, in their applicability to countless aspects of the human condition.

PART II: LIBERTY

Bottom of the Barrel

Man is the most intelligent of the animals – and the most silly.

—Diogenes

You wake up in the center of town, curled in a large barrel.

You have no possessions, and no worries.

The sun shines bright on you, and for that you are thankful.

You are happy, in a way that seemingly no one else is.

You remember that fool Socrates. If he's so wise, why does he care so much about the approval of others? You simply can't change other people. To be fair, it's more likely that he does not, but simply likes talking. In either case, seeking out others and responding to them is too much effort. You'd rather be left alone here in the comfort of the barrel.

If I got bored of sitting here, I'd probably go about talking to people. I suppose I'd be very much like Socrates, then, yes. I would want to make anyone I talk to realize their own stupidity. People really are fools, chasing the silliest things and, worse still, not even being satisfied. For those who put so much emphasis on 'the good' and their 'noble way of life', they sure do spend a lot of time being miserable. Socrates knew this too, yes, but I would not approach people for the same reasons. And of course not in the same way, heavens no, that's far too much effort. And Socrates was too direct, anyway. He showed too much of his true self. Most people put up walls around themselves, and they like it that way. When these kind of people finally see someone out in the open, they feel bad about their own obscured state. So they lash out against the dissenter. They raise their defenses against him because they themselves feel vulnerable.

I don't know. Socrates should've realized that to have any effect he'd have to be more coy. He really does know nothing...but I suppose I could have some fun if I had to do it, yes. I'd pester the townspeople. Further my hard-earned reputation for myself as a crazy old man, which is fun in itself, and has the added benefit of most people not paying me much mind. And then, when their defenses are down, I'll introduce a seed of doubt. And then they'll realize that I was right all along...It's worked well so far. Only hooligans and stray dogs ever approach my barrel, and I don't mind them nearly as much as the average scoundrel. And it's easy enough to scare the average person away. Just point out how much trouble they cause themselves with all their useless things and trivial concerns. Their worries about this or that, right or wrong. All the trouble that living with other people causes. How uncontrollable, and how painfully *boring*...

Much to your annoyance, a shadow descends over your face.

You stir and look up to find a young man, obnoxiously-dressed in that useless kind of decorative armor, now standing between you and the sun. His lips begin to flap. Oh, he must be trying to talk to you. You peek your head out of the barrel in the hope that you can resolve this quickly and get back to whatever it is you want to do.

Greetings, the young man says, I am Alexander of Macedonia.

He pauses. You squint and blink. He is holding a thick, ornately-bound book. Its binding and cover are a deep blue and, although heavily worn, still sturdy. He holds it stiffly in the manner of a court document, although it is clearly nothing of the sort. The young man Alexander's lips flap again:

I am in Athens because it is the birthplace of philosophy. I wish to visit my old teacher, Aristotle. But you know all of this already, of course. I am here, first, to see you, Diogenes.

Me? You feign surprise, looking around at the small crowd assembled in a semicircle around your barrel sitting against the wall of the temple. All these people are so bothersome. You wish they would go away.

Yes, you, Alexander flaps. I have heard countless stories and have spoken to many of your followers. I have heard how you would walk this marketplace at midday – high noon! – bearing an oil lamp. You were searching for an honest man and found only rats. Is this not true? Alexander addressed the crowd, which stirred and simply grumbled. Like Socrates before you, you could not find an honest man in all of your searches. That is because you are the very man you are searching for.

You furrow your brow and open one eye in the kookiest manner you can manage, all while stroking your knotted beard.

Well, you say, I do not recall ever owning a lamp. All I own is this clay bowl. I don't even own this barrel. So you must be mistaken: I am searching for no one. I have no followers. I don't even know what 'philosophy' is, and much less why you would come to me for it.

Are you not Diogenes of Sinope? Alexander asks.

I am, you reply. As for any stories you may have heard, they must surely be false, for if they were truthfully told then you would stay away from me.

Ah, clever Diogenes! Alexander laughs and continues. I follow your ruse. What, then, of the time when you could hardly find a man at all? Surely this story is not false. Did you not sit in during Plato's lecture on human beings, Diogenes? Plato began as he always did, claiming that man was a 'featherless biped'. But you were prepared, and at that very moment you revealed from under your robe what else but a live chicken! You had plucked it clean, missing but a single feather, one that you had left intact for this very occasion. Plucking that final feather, the chicken let such a cry that Plato's lecture

could not continue on account of the laughter. Perhaps it was one feather too many – for you, that is – as Plato then banned you from his Academy. Oh the marvelous legends told of you, Diogenes. Your wry humor taught me more than most battles I’ve fought. Can you spare a humble student some time this afternoon?

I haven’t the faintest idea why you are still here, you say. Have you not heard anything I’ve said? And even if I were interested in talking to you, I really can’t spare the time. I’m quite busy at the moment.

You move a clay bowl – your only possession – from upright to upside down position. Searching around the rest of the barrel and realizing that you’ve nothing left to do, no other possible objects to tidy up, you sense a job well done. You recline and close your eyes.

Alexander laughs heartily at your movements. He waits a moment for you to respond. Perhaps a minute passes as Alexander slowly comes to realize his mistake: that your actions were not the performance of a good-natured joke prepared for his presence, but instead, a genuine lack of interest. His features grow sharp and cold, obscured by shadow. Sunlight shines along the profile of his curly hair.

Alexander speaks again, slowly and more sternly this time. You may not know who I am. As Aristotle says it is more forgivable to act out of ignorance than malice, I will assume the best in you, Diogenes. But Aristotle was also right when he said that my temper is short, and despite my best efforts to quell it, I cannot guarantee your safety in the face of this intolerable disrespect. I am Alexander of Macedonia, descendent of Achilles and ruler of all Greece. I could destroy this city in a night if I did not already control it. Now rise.

Several children, in addition to those already gathered to watch Alexander, had now gathered along the periphery to watch as the exchange grew more heated. You glance upward at the shadowed Alexander. In the pause allocated for your response, the only sound is the nervous whispers of those children peeking out from behind taller legs.

You sigh.

Alex, you're blocking my sun, you say. Would you put some of that swift-footed-ness to good use and step aside?

Enraged, Alexander draws in his breath and tips the barrel over, spilling you and your clay bowl on the ground. You stare at Alexander, upside down. You're unperturbed by his anger, and your sly smile provokes Alexander further, almost begging him to strike you. But you and him both know that such would be far worse for the great Alexander than the town fool.

Frustrated, Alexander turns away, his crisp military cloak snapping behind him. His boot bumps your clay bowl, which gives Alexander pause. With a firm stomp, he shatters the bowl and grinds it into the dust.

You fool! You shout, grasping Alexander's armored leg. That was my most prized possession – I, I will die of thirst if I cannot drink!

Utterly befuddled, Alexander stares down at you in silence. A nearby vendor coughs in the stillness. You look into the crowd and see confused adults and smiling children. You flash a smile back and cast yourself to the ground, sobbing anew.

Wait, you say, catching your breath. You look back up at Alex and slide your hands further up his calf, and onto his thigh.

Alex – Alex, my boy you've done it, you say. You were right, I don't even need that bowl! No, I will drink from my hands as the animals do. I will become like a wild child. Thank you Alex, you truly are the greatest! You've

shown me the error of my ways, the devilish hold that even a single clay bowl can have on a man. It is you who should be teaching me your philosophy. I should become an Alexandrian...what will you lecture on first?

You slide your hands further up his leg when Alexander pushes you to the ground. He grunts and turns away with a snap again, finally storming away for good. The crowd shifts and follows Alexander, on his way to the Lyceum. Leaving you on the ground in a cloud of dust.

Just as randomly as the disturbance appeared, the disturbance passed. You don't think he'll be returning.

Satisfied, you reset the barrel and climb in for a long day of soaking up the sun.

Free Your Mind

A Prison, Unseen

You have the look of a man who accepts what he sees because he is expecting to wake up. Ironically, that's not far from the truth. Do you believe in fate, Neo?

—No.

Why not?

—Because I don't like the idea that I'm not in control of my life.

—The Matrix⁸⁶

The precise moment when you realize that you are thinking, is the same moment when you are suddenly able to escape from your worries. To think about your own thoughts is to, for a moment, sacrifice the self. And to consider the world from a perspective outside of your own eyes is to be freed from its limits.⁸⁷ A respite from the prison of your mind. Self-consciousness allows us to transcend the self. Then, we can consider life in a more objective and universal sense, caring for others and the world as a whole. Yet both liberty and self-improvement are accused of being self-centered in origin. On the contrary, the world is composed of a collection of individuals, each so internally imbalanced that they can scarcely refrain from hurting each other. Change on a grand scale begins in the self. A personal sense of responsibility – personal, familial, social, or religious in origin – is all but necessary to inculcate a moral education.⁸⁸ Self-help is not selfish.

It is preferable to cut off unpleasant impressions before they take hold,

before we fully commit to them as thoughts and actions and eventually beliefs. But in the case that the impression is strong enough to overwhelm our self-control – if we let our guard down – then the only choice remaining is to deal with the impression straight on. In this most critical of last resorts, you must stir yourself to action; you must light a fire not beneath your own feet but deep inside your chest.

You must never forget that you can choose to do anything. Pick a price, then pay it, and there's nothing less to do. The moment you choose to believe that you cannot do something is precisely the moment that that option becomes closed to you. Up until and even at that moment, it was simply a matter of commitment. But as that (false) perception is unnaturally internalized as (false) belief, you lose that power. You have chosen to limit yourself, and chosen a false mode of life. You have embraced the self-imposed limits of false perception.

Just as Neo intuitively understands that fate is unappealing because it robs our lives of personal agency, it takes much more for him to actually believe it. The Matrix is a prison of “blind certainty, a close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn't even know he's locked up.”⁸⁹ This may as well be the summary of complicated concept of the Matrix. Except this quote is not taken from the film, it is David Foster Wallace talking about the trivial lives we lead every day. The speech is often taken as a critique of modern society. Indeed, there is much to critique, but the point transcends temporal context as a universal truth. To be needlessly frustrated by the external world is as ancient a problem as anything. And to embrace this mistaken notion – that *your* agency has somehow *been taken from you* – is to accept the very prison that you are still ignorant of:

It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.

—What truth?

That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage. Into a prison that you cannot taste or see or touch. A prison for your mind.⁹⁰

You, too, were born into a prison. By virtue of your body's physical existence – your biology, your evolutionary history – you are bound entirely by the vicious tendrils of a ghostly and shapeless kraken. You can't see it or sense it at all. Because it is a monster of your own creation: a perennial coloring of the objective world through the poison of false judgments. It is effortless to judge the sensations your body produces. But it is just as easy to be wrong. Just as the rabid man refuses the water that would save his life, the diseased mistakes sweetness for bitterness, so, too, do you mistake the truth in the guise of false judgment.⁹¹ Not merely mistake it or misjudge it, but actively reject it, as if the truth were falsehood. Instead, reject false perceptions. See past your eyelids. See things as they truly are, not just as they 'should' be.

When faced with the staggering possibilities that life affords you, rest for a moment. Settle your mind in this freedom. Choose to reject boredom – there is too much to do and too little time.

Your will is quite literally the only way that you can impact the world at all. Even in this our power is limited by external events. But through thinking and resolving to do something, our perceptions can impact our will which, in turn, can impact the physical world. In actuality, a choice is the resolution that your thoughts will move your physical body through time and space to rearrange the world that we perceive. More clearly, the absolute, base freedom that choice allows us is summarized clearly in harrowing words from Marcus Aurelius, "The universe is change; our life is what our thoughts

make it.”⁹² Reflect on this constantly, staring deep into the clear water, until the only image you can see is yourself staring back, coterminal, one and the same, with the best of the ideas you can imagine.

Often, it is productive to talk through this. Reiterating simple truths with others, explaining things you know in your own words, can help you understand them in a deeper way. Yet this advantage is also available to yourself at every moment. To engage in dialogue with yourself to force your present self to face its ideal self. Through doing so, you can realize how active a role your own mind and its judgments plays in altering the world you constantly face; that, quite literally, your thoughts change *your* world. To see how clearly the path would appear, if you were any other person than yourself. That is, when other people face their own problems, solutions to them are often so obvious that it pains you to watch them fail to execute them. Yet, it is always easy to see from the outside. When faced with a problem nearly identical, suddenly you are unable to see the very same solution. On the inside, we are all blind. Thus, to simulate a dialogue with yourself is to engage in a kind of philosophical discourse. To imagine you are consoling a friend, or writing them a letter in an effort to inspire them. To *exhort*: Is that all you have? Is this really your limit, or do you just want to take it easy? Why would you ever settle for less?

Nauseated

Its onslaught is of very brief duration...this is why doctors have nicknamed it "rehearsing death," since sooner or later the breath does just what I has been trying to do all those times.

Do you imagine that as I write this I must be feeling in high spirits at having escaped this time? No, it would be just as absurd for me to feel overjoyed at its being over – as if this meant I was a healthy man again – as it would be for a person to think he has won his case on obtaining an extension of time before the trial...Even as I fought for breath, though, I never ceased to find comfort in cheerful and courageous reflections.

"What's this?" I said. "So death is having all these tries at me, is he? Let him, then! I had a try at him a long while ago myself."

"When was this?" you'll say. Before I was born. Death is just not being. What that is like I know already. It will be the same after me as it was before me. If there is any torment in the later state, there must also have be torment in the period before we saw the light of day; yet we never felt conscious of any distress then. I ask you, wouldn't you say that anyone who took the view that lamp was worse off when it was put out than it was before it was lit was an utter idiot?

We, too, are lit and put out....You can feel assured on my score of this: I shall not be afraid when the last hour comes – I'm already prepared, not planning as much as a day ahead. The man, though, whom you should admire and imitate, is the one who finds it a joy to live and in spite of that is not reluctant to die.

—Seneca, on asthma²³

Seneca overcame his fear through acceptance of the situation, and, paradoxically, willing the undesirable to happen. Together this has the effect of neutralizing his fear of death until it no longer produced its typical response. Whereas previously Seneca's fear contributed greatly to his asthma attacks, now he could rest in calm confidence that he was not contributing to the

attack he was enduring. No, he was watching it unfold, feeling his body's response with curiosity as a scientist may observe fire ants safely through the laboratory glass – aware of the pain that is objectively present in the object of observation (himself), but not paying it undue attention, lamenting its existence, or judging its presence in this particular case.

I heard about Seneca after years of struggling to eat and keep food down. I used to have constant bouts of intense nausea. For a while I thought it was something physical that could be treated, like acid reflux or heartburn, both which cause nausea. But now it is apparent that it was entirely mental. I've woken myself up by vomiting. I've walked down the street completely at peace, hurling the next. Perhaps it once was physical, but soon I began to fear the emerging pattern. My fear caused the pattern to solidify into something definite. You already know about your minds' hunger to identify patterns.⁹⁴ I was so scared that this would become a pattern that I made it so. This is the twisted logic of anxiety. The solution is a strange one. I figured, once I started to vomit there was no stopping it, so next time it happened (every few weeks or so) I resolved to will it to happen in spite of my body's way of protesting through pain and panic. Sure enough, this didn't prevent me from throwing up, but it made the process much easier. After one or two times of actually going through what I feared so much (and, quite honestly, caused myself to fear) I realized my body's signals were nothing to be afraid of. Experiencing the object of my fear was a way to retain the power of choice where previously I had surrendered it.

When I say that everything happens for a reason, I don't mean it in the spiritual or deterministic sense. If it helps you to believe that the things that

happen to you are fated, then reflect upon the fundamental distinction between what is within our control and without. You can submit to what is without our control and rest in the freedom which that realization provides. But I mean it in a deeper sense. Everything you feel has a purpose. It is easy to forget that pain and fear have vital roles to play in our immediate survival. Even more complex emotions such as jealousy, shame, grief, and pride have important social roles to play. This is to say that while our emotions are extremely fallible, they certainly fulfill a purpose in our lives as animals.

This can get tricky in cases of physical and mental illness, or destructive habits. Addiction is explainable in a biological or even hereditary sense, but under no circumstances does that justify it. So, too, can mental illness take the form of an inheritable condition, but it is entirely up to you to take care of yourself and maintain an active, positive outlook. Mental illness is interesting because it is the perversion of normal emotions and responses to extreme measures. While a small amount of fear helps us proceed carefully, anxiety is excess fear to the point of panic and obsession. So too can sadness reflect the gravity of loss or a critical mistake, marking it in our minds so that in the future we may pay better attention. But depression is this taken to illogical extremes. It is not purely mental – living in this mental state for extended periods of time changes your physical person. Energy levels, metabolism and sleep requirements, weight, mood, all of this depends on the union between mental and physical.

Even though the feelings have their roots in evolutionary reasons, there may be no reason you have the extreme dose of them. There may be no reason why you are depressed or anxious. That is the nature of these conditions. But even if there were a reason, would it offer you relief? No, only you can choose to offer yourself relief. No one can do it for you.

Reason or not, the response is the same: recognize that how you feel is not entirely within your control. Some people have more control than other, some people have to go through things that others don't. But you are always in control of some part of your mind, even if now that part feels small. And through time and practice, that part will grow with you until it constitutes you wholly, when you can confidently say once again: I am in control of my mind. I am in control my life.

Redefine

Body. Soul. Mind. Sensations: the body. Desires: the soul. Reasoning: the mind. To experience sensations: even grazing beasts do that. To let your desires control you: even wild animals do that – and rutting humans, and tyrants...To make your mind your guide to what seems best: even people who deny the gods do that. Even people who betray their country...If all the rest is common coin, then what is unique to the good man? To welcome with affection what is sent by fate. Not to stain or disturb the spirit within him with a mess of false beliefs...an end to be approached in purity, in serenity, in acceptance, in peaceful unity with what must be.

—Marcus Aurelius²⁵

When you find yourself in a difficult situation: remember these three words, now redefined as you have come to internalize them:

Careful means that you doubt first impressions, which come from an unreliable interface between the real world, and your mind: the body. Aurelius writes,

The mind is the ruler of the soul. It should remain unstirred by agitations of the flesh – gentle and violent ones alike. Not mingling with them, but fencing itself off and keeping those feelings in their place.

When they make their way into our thoughts, through the sympathetic link between mind and body, don't try to resist the sensation. The sensation is natural. But don't let the mind start in with judgments, calling it 'good' or 'bad.'⁹⁶

You have no say in what impressions appear to you, or your gut reaction. But you have an absolute responsibility to take these for what they are worth, and no further.

Whole means you wish to see things as they truly are, not just how you wish they were. Other words for this are 'universal' or 'objective' as opposed to 'personal' or 'subjective'. It means rejecting all that is personal as if it were false.

Bold means the strength to execute. You know exactly what to do, yet you hesitate when it comes time to do it. Is it a matter of motivation, or resolve, or ignorance, or simple stupidity? Actually, if you fail to act, it doesn't matter the reason. Why? Because fortune does not favor the wise, or the clever, or the rich, no.

These three maxims correspond to the three disciplines of Stoicism. You must *judge carefully*, *assent* to the *whole* of life, and decide to *act boldly*. Only then can you purge internal contradictions in exchange for consistency. Only then will your actions be in alignment with your will in alignment with your thoughts; only then will you reverberate not in the dissonant tones of citizen, human, and animal, but in the harmony of a singular nature, solid and pure.⁹⁷ Only then will your character reflect what is within your power. Only then will your humanity be fully realized.

Whatever this is that I am, it is flesh and a little spirit and an intelligence. Throw away your books; stop letting yourself be distracted. That is not allowed. Instead, as if you were dying right now, despise your flesh. A mess of blood, pieces of bone, a woven tangle of nerves, veins, arteries. Consider what the spirit is: air, and never the same air, but vomited out

and gulped in again every instant. Finally, the intelligence. Think of it this way: You are an old man. Stop allowing your mind to be a slave, to be jerked about by selfish impulses, to kick against fate and the present, and to mistrust the future.⁹⁸

It is all here, all summarized in this passage, perhaps Aurelius' most comprehensive representation of Stoic doctrine. The division between mind and body. The imperfect interface between them, and the ease at which one can lead the other astray. The imperfection of perception, and the greed of indulged judgment. The selfishness of our animal desires. A disdain for the flesh from which those desires root, and to which we are all physically bound. Another, higher desire to transcend those lower ones. To imagine that same body as old and decrepit, but the mind still untarnished. And above all, an imperative to retain control of your mind. To reject false judgments, to accept objective ones – whatever they may be, and to act accordingly. To stand straight and still, like the rock that the waves of the storm crash around. These are the three Stoic disciplines, and the essential practices of the free mind.

Simplicity's Deception

One kid says to me, 'See that bird? What kind of bird is that?' I said, 'I haven't the slightest idea what kind of a bird it is.' He says, 'It's a brown-throated thrush. Your father doesn't teach you anything!' But it was the opposite. He had already taught me: 'See that bird?' he says. 'It's a Spencer's warbler.' I knew he didn't know the real name....

'You can know the name of that bird in all the languages of the world, but when you're finished, you'll know absolutely nothing whatever about the bird. You'll only know about humans in different places, and what they call the bird. So let's look at the bird and see what it's doing – that's what counts.' I learned very early the difference between knowing the name of something and knowing something....

I went to my father and said, 'Say, Pop, I noticed something. When I pull the wagon, the ball rolls to the back of the wagon. And when I'm pulling it along and I suddenly stop, the ball rolls to the front of the wagon. Why is that?' 'That, nobody knows,' he said. 'The general principle is that things which are moving tend to keep on moving, and things which are standing still tend to stand still, unless you push them hard. This tendency is called 'inertia,' but nobody knows why it's true.'

Now, that's a deep understanding. He didn't just give me the name.

—Richard P. Feynman²⁹

Simple truths are often disregarded on account of their simplicity. This is an error, and those who dismiss simple truths could do to distinguish the feeling of confusion with that of the act of learning. For must not the acquisition of knowledge feel similar to the purging of confusion? In many ways, confusion is a necessary prerequisite to knowing anything with certainty. Confusion is the unpleasant sensation that drives us to find truth.

Accepting this, the all-too-common nods that accompany discussion of incomprehensible and vapid topics (I'm sure you can think of a few) take on a new meaning. Nodding says 'I know', when you actually haven't the slightest idea. This is easier and more fashionable than admitting you don't know or you aren't sure. Yet to feign knowledge when you have known, even innocently, is to embrace falsehood. It is to blur your own internal measure of truth until even you lose sight of it. It is to embrace as true what is, in reality, the precise opposite of knowledge so defined by Socrates: claiming to know even though you are ignorant.¹⁰⁰ Worse than ignorance is dishonesty, and this mistake drips with both. I would hardly call it innocent.

To claim you know when you do not is perhaps the worst sin of intellectual dishonesty. A prime example of this is manner in which we all readily dismiss truths on account of their simplicity. You may think that you entirely understand the meaning behind fundamental truths such as 'you can't change the past' or 'it's useless to get angry' – yet how much mental energy do you still waste on them? Consider, now, that you may know what they mean in a basic or superficial sense, but not fully. You dismiss them before they have run their course through your mind. For if you understood them in entirety, then you could trust your past judgment on the subject and not waste further time on them. The fact that problems such as these continue to occupy your mind suggests you may need to invest more time understanding the principles, and waste less time dealing with the fallout. This is intuitively clear, but difficult to execute. It takes much time and much repetition to fully understand these concepts, yet the payoff is great: a freedom from self-inflicted suffering.

With this fallacious conflation now purged, the clear understanding that simplicity is no obstacle to truth can aid us in a renewed appreciation of our

current knowledge, and in the search for new knowledge. Expelling this social self-defense instinct (of appearing both original yet universally agreeable) is vital. Frankly, you should not be concerned about the opinion of others; only those who you choose to be concerned with. Until you address this natural but misleading instinct, you can never recognize the truth as such. Getting rid of it allows you to admit to yourself that you don't know certain things, things you were previously certain of. For there is no greater pleasure than being cleansed of a falsehood. It allows you to become comfortable with not knowing. It allows you to behave in a more honest and forthright manner to others. There are more fallacies to be purged, but for now a concern for the truth will suffice.

Consider evolution, prone to common fallacies and often taken for granted. It is always good to think of the diverse forms that nature takes. The mountain goat that can climb a sheer rock wall, the octopus that can open a sealed jar from the inside, the cave-dwelling and snow-white Axolotl that has never seen light. It has been a long-standing problem to explain this multitude of distinct species. There have been some fantastic stories, but none of them are ultimately satisfying. Several philosophers and scientists came close to a more realistic solution, but even Aristotle and Kant could not answer it in any lasting manner. It seems we finally have settled upon an answer in Darwin's succinct principle of natural selection: natural variability resulting in differential reproductive success, the extinction of less well-adapted forms of life, and the inheritance of beneficial traits in the offspring of more well-adapted forms.¹⁰¹

Evolution is such a brilliantly obvious, simple, and self-evidently true idea that it prompts a response of 'I could've told you that'. Most complex

ideas have this effect. Importantly, this response only occurs *after* understanding the theory, so you shouldn't believe everything you think. Upon reflection, however, this impression is replaced by one of increasing complexity: 'Wait, but why didn't I think of that?' and 'No, there is something else going on here'. Finally, the complexity of the idea fades and is replaced by the original sense of simplicity – but with a new feeling of the awe that comes with understanding. This is the process of learning.¹⁰² And it turns out that you need to relearn most of what you learned in school. Don't be satisfied with a surface understanding, with knowing the name of something. Strive for a deeper understanding.

When you gain such an understanding, it is often accompanied by a sense of awe. This new feeling of awe is not inherent to the newly learned idea itself; rather, it is an expression of how ideas affect you, of how the truth and completeness of a theory is portrayed by, rather than betrayed by, its simplicity.¹⁰³ Suddenly, you realize that you had the causality of the situation reversed: it is not merely coincidental or accidental that powerful ideas tend to be simple, no, they are powerful *because* they are simple. The simplicity is due to some meaning, some form or structure or logical relation, which, although easily grasped by the mind, cannot be easily expressed in words.¹⁰⁴ It is likely from an ancient part of our minds, a remnant of a time before we thought in words and discreet thoughts. Thus, upon further reflection, claims to simplicity are reoriented and refocused as a boon rather than a bane. What was previously a weakness becomes a great strength. The most powerful ideas need not be complicated; it is often the case that the simplest turn out to be not merely the most powerful, but also the most beautiful.

This realization also explains why you had previously ignored the simple

truths. They were repeated so much, so far divorced from their original context, and so often incorrectly that they became stale and lifeless. A cliché is a truth that has lost its meaning; it is still true, but it does not produce any of the revelatory feelings that accompany truths. It no longer produces the same impression. It is through the simple misapplication of truths that they are destroyed; not through disproof, but in a manner far worse – decay, ignorance, and defamation. They are simply forgotten, buried under more pressing but frivolous concerns. Things that are urgent but ultimately unimportant, wastes of your time. And this is a shame in the fullest sense, for the value of these truths is known, they are already within you! You just don't realize it, or have become convinced that there must be some other answer. But in reality, the simple truth hit you and bounced right off. It was not the quality or complexity of the idea that was lacking, but, rather, your appraisal of it. You need to spend more time with it to understand.

I spent countless hours searching for these simple rules because I believed that there must be some kind of simple answer. It turned out to be like an onion and I kept peeling back the infinite layers and as the problems inside got smaller and more numerous I just got tired of looking at them.¹⁰⁵ We are all born with an inherent desire to understand.¹⁰⁶ But this desire can lead us astray and can leave us disheartened if there turns out to be no easy answer. I know this pain well, and it cannot be directly satisfied. But it can be eased through learning a different kind of satisfaction, of accepting partial and incomplete answers. The lack of an answer becomes an answer in itself. The previous frustration is then diverted.

Like most discoveries, I found something I wasn't looking for. Greater people than you and I have already struggled and transcended anything we could possibly face. Every thought you can possibly think has already been

thought of. This is at once terrifying and deeply freeing. Behind fears of insignificance, there is comfort in discovering your own obscurity. There is relief in the universal and communal nature of the struggle. And these great men and women have left a written record of their trials – left us with what are perhaps the most complete answers we will ever get.

Gilded Pleasures

Subjectivity as the Root of Suffering

To the stand-bys above, add this one: always to define whatever it is we perceive – to trace its outline – so we can see what it really is: its substance. Stripped bare. As a whole. Unmodified. And to call it by its name – the thing itself and its components, to which it will eventually return. Nothing is so conducive to spiritual growth as this capacity for logical and accurate analysis of everything that happens to us. To look at it in such a way that we understand what need it fulfills, and in what kind of world. And its value to that world as a whole and to man in particular – as a citizen of that higher city, of which all other cities are mere households.

—Marcus Aurelius¹⁰⁷

Think objectively. Meaning, outside of yourself. Consider the world from another point of view. Take a foreign perspective, not as an individual or a family member, but ‘as a citizen of that higher city’ – a meaningless link in a long chain of humanity, or better yet, a single circlet in the impenetrable and endless chain mail of all of nature. At every moment, ask yourself: does this really matter? Is it bad for the beehive, or just for you – blind, impotent, and frail – little more than a drone?¹⁰⁸ It is nearly always the latter, and you should reject those judgments accordingly.

To develop this discipline of judgment is of the utmost moral importance. It is your obligation as a living being to grow to the best of your ability. And as intelligent animals, the most important form of growth occurs in the mind. Practice cultivating proper judgment, something only learned through experience, no, through dedication, intention, and focused

practice. Aurelius writes:

always make a definition or description of the object that occurs in your representation, so as to be able to see it as it is in its essence, both as a whole and as divided into its constituent parts, and say to yourself its proper name and the names of those things out of which it is composed, and into which it will be dissolved.¹⁰⁹

To take your perceptions and to strip them bare. To examine your judgments, to test if they are unfounded, and to reveal the underlying structure of the object you perceive – a deep structure of a whole wholly constituted by its component parts – a structure shared by all of nature. Just as any judgments you may add to the act of perception are extraneous, so, too, is a whole not constituted by anything unnecessary. Thus, with the stripping away of judgment (for all judgment regarding externals is unnecessary) the subjective view is traded for an objective one.

The corresponding mental move is to trade your limited view of the world for a grander one – how each part of the world constitutes a necessary component of the universe as a whole, which, by definition, contains no unnecessary or extra parts. That is to say, you must take the world from an impersonal position, situating “events and objects in the perspective of universal Nature.”¹¹⁰ Since everything in the world is necessary, there is no reason to despise or otherwise object to any of it. To fully internalize, not just understand, this fact is to free yourself from the tired burden of resisting the world in all its incarnations.

The key principle here is the complete division between body and mind. That is, the interface between your physical sensations and the feelings you actually experience is a tenuous one. Your experience can easily be deceived, unreal, if you let it. Precisely because the principal, characteristic activity of a human is to reflect and think rationally about their own actions, you have

a special method to defend against this deception. No other animal can do this.

For animate beings, 'harmful' is whatever obstructs the operation of the senses – or the fulfillment of what they intend. Similar obstructions constitute harm to plants. So too for rational creatures, anything that obstructs the operation of the mind is harmful.

Apply this to yourself.

Do pain and pleasure have their hooks in you? Let the senses deal with it. Are there obstacles to your action? If you failed to reckon with the possibility, then that would harm you, as a rational being. But if you use common sense, you haven't been harmed or even obstructed. No one can obstruct the operations of the mind. Nothing can get at them – not fire or steel, not tyrants, not abuse – nothing.ⁱⁱⁱ

Thus, the uniquely human ability to reflect on yourself offers a master key to the entire array of locks that nature presents to trouble your body.

Violent Waves

*Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you have not;
remember that what you now have was once among the things
you only hoped for.*

—Epicurus

Pain is natural. Pain is a part of life. Pain is, by definition, not pleasant, but it need not invoke suffering. Indeed, there is a way to endure pain with curiosity. Similar to the discipline of judgment, desires can be questioned through as they pass through the filter between body and mind. You can 'feel' a desire without consenting to the desire itself, effectively cutting the desire off and preventing it from fully forming. Simply watch the cascade of sensations that affect your body, but do not let your mind judge them as good or bad. This is an aspect of control that is always in your power. Aurelius

writes that the mind can “remain unstirred by agitations of the flesh”.¹¹² To maintain that although the mind can listen to the body, it doesn’t need to. When this happens, Aurelius advises that you “don’t try to resist the sensation. The sensation is natural. But don’t let the mind start in with judgments, calling it ‘good’ or ‘bad.’”¹¹³

This means that pleasure and pain are one and the same: both spring from a common source, both are caused by judgment as the root of all suffering. For in pleasure’s absence, pain easily replaces it. The only way to avoid this kind of pain is to reject unnecessary or unnatural pleasures. “Either pain affects the body (which is the body’s problem) or it affects the soul. But the soul can choose not to be affected, preserving its own serenity, its own tranquility. All our decisions, urges, desires, aversions lie within. No evil can touch them.”¹¹⁴ This is a choice, not a guarantee. You have to want to be immune to gain that power. No, wanting it is not enough! You have to work to gain it. Without actually applying the time and energy, your immunity will never materialize. Instead, accept only the pleasures that are necessary and natural, and never to excess. All of these are based in the simple pleasure of existence.

Similarly, all negative emotions have their roots in faulty judgment mistakenly applied. Ask yourself: is the wise man ever angry? Surprisingly, Aristotle claims the answer is yes

Anybody can become angry - that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way - that is not within everybody’s power and is not easy.¹¹⁵

For Aristotle, anger can be judged correctly or not, applied in appropriate

amounts or not, and ultimately justified or not. Aristotle makes no distinction between the valid emotion you feel when you've actually been wronged, and the mistaken emotion you feel when you're being selfish. Rather, the specific contexts of the situation are what make the difference.

In contrast, Stoics deny that any negative emotion can be justified. For even if your neighbor stole your car out of your driveway in plain day, it remains within your control to choose whether or not to take offense. The possibility remains that he was justified morally in his theft, having to drive someone to the hospital or whatnot. But even if this were not the case, and your neighbor stole from you simply out of greed, Stoics such as Marcus Aurelius maintain that no amount of anger can be truly justified. Indeed, you may feel the beginnings of the emotion, a rising tightness in your chest, blood rushing to your face – but this is but a physical response, like hair on your neck prickling in a cold wind. Rather, there is an important distinction between a perceptual response, and consenting to it. Even as your heart races and your body wills you to get angry, you can overpower it with your mind. You can choose to not become angry. Marcus Aurelius writes, “Our anger and annoyance are more detrimental to us than the things themselves which anger or annoy us.”¹⁶ This we can know with absolute certainty. In the face of the arguments just stated, and countless others left unstated, it was always remain true. Any situation you face will become easier to endure if you do not indulge negative emotions. Anger solves nothing; worse, it always hinders.

Desire – the root of all negative emotions – is but the violent collision of expectations with reality. You already know that reality will inevitably overpower your expectations, it is only a matter of time. If you allow your expectations to persist now, they will only crash more dramatically in due

time. And if you do not merely allow them to persist but instead actively indulge them, then you will cause yourself pain so great that it overshadows the original problem. You must face reality: to reject it is not only impossible, but dangerous and delusional. To indulge these delusional expectations is to actively seek out your own frustration. So adjust yours accordingly.

Frustration is a classic rejection of reality. It is the archetype of the child, because their narcissism has not yet been tempered by the realization that their desires are not all important. Worse, frustration is a positive feedback loop: the more frustration you feel, the easier it becomes to be frustrated at your own feelings. Break the loop, through distraction or rationalization, and you will break frustration's hold on you. So too, is grief a rejection of the true state of affairs of the world. It is only desire viciously transmuted: a desire to keep what was only ever loaned to you.

Of special note are the unnatural and unnecessary social emotions: shame, guilt, and embarrassment. Now, if you feel none of these then you need to show more concern for others – you need to realize that we all live in common, facing the same problems – but, more likely than not, you feel shame in abundance. This is the natural state, and to correct shame's abundance, you must overcompensate in the other direction. Realize first that the thoughts of others can never harm you. Embarrassment in itself harms no one. Talk to strangers, just to try to embarrass yourself, and you will emerge unscathed. Secondly, you must recognize the passage of time, and the nature of making mistakes. As the days pass and you attempt to act according to the best of your ability, you will inevitably make mistakes. The moment these mistakes are committed, they pass from the realm of thought to the irrevocable past. Thus, they can no longer be changed, not in the way that you can make decisions in the present moment, or plan for the future.

(And even in these matters, your control is not absolute.) This is the nature of the effervescent passage of thought into action into history. What was once a matter of deliberation is suddenly a fact – impossible to change. This is not to say we should live moment-to-moment, forgetting the past as soon as it forms. On the contrary, the past, especially your past, is vital to learn from. There is a reason it always comes to mind. Rather, do not be troubled by your past. It is stuck there; nothing about your past can truly reach into your future life.

So relieve yourself from this burden of embarrassment. Don't relive that moment again and again. Focus instead at the task at hand. Why do you keep recalling the situation before your mind's eye? It's not going to change, and it will just make you feel rotten. That moment has passed already. And soon you will too.

Easily Fooled

Disgust at what things are made of: Liquid, dust, bones, filth. Or marble as hardened dirt, gold and silver as residues, clothes as hair, purple dye as shellfish blood. And all the rest. And the same with our living breath – transformed from one thing to another.

—Marcus Aurelius¹¹⁷

When you find yourself overcome by desire for sex or food, question yourself. Do you really desire these things, or are you really seeking a more fundamental desire – that of escape, that of satiating boredom, that of neglecting the work to be done. Often deeper, more internal fears are expressed in strange ways. For these fears do not want to be confronted, so they will

send out smaller habits and other spasms of the mind to remain hidden. All of which is to say: your mind is easily deceived. We are but reasonably intelligent animals who think themselves something great. This hubris is even more easily exploited than our capacity for deception. And so advertisers, politicians, enemies, and even friends can easily target weaknesses in your mind. Assumption, the cousin of ignorance, is the root of all evil.

If this is not the case, and you are legitimately desiring something, then there are techniques to take the edge off. But at the root of all the techniques is a willingness to change. They are useless unless they are put into action. But, you have the ability to question all of your impulses. In fact, you *should*; you have a moral imperative to do so. But it will not happen by itself, you have to make it happen.

This is because you will be wrong about much every day. Without examining and questioning your own thoughts at every turn, you will surely miss your own mistakes. To never question your thoughts is to welcome your own mistakes; to be consent to their presence. The only way to stop your errors in judgement from clouding your perception is to be vigilant. This is entirely within your power to do so, just as your character is entirely within your power. Your character could be redefined as nothing more than how you handle the desires of your body, and we would retain a fairly good picture of what a good person is, even with this limited definition. No, this cannot be true for

Nature did not blend things so inextricably that you can't draw your own boundaries – place your own well-being in your own hands. It's quite possible to be a good man without anyone realizing it. Remember that. And this too: you don't need much to live happily. And just because you've abandoned your hopes of becoming a great thinker or scientist, don't give up on attaining freedom, achieving humility, serving others, obeying God.^{[118](#)}

Through questioning your own body, your own desires, we can learn that base, raw happiness that comes from the simple pleasure of existing.

Seneca offers such a technique, asking you to confront your desires instead as threats to your personal freedom: “Show me a man who isn’t a slave; one who is a slave to sex, another to money, another to ambition; all are slaves to hope or fear...and there is no state of slavery more disgraceful than one which is self-imposed.”¹¹⁹ Much more common, however, is the Stoic technique of rationalization, a stripping away of judgments typically associated with the object to stifle its desirability.

Socrates choking the chicken in the marketplace is an example of this technique.¹²⁰ That is, attack the object of your desire through ridicule. Laugh at what was grave, before you’re in it. Aurelius exemplifies this technique in everything from fine food, the royal robes he wears, and even sex

When you have savouries and fine dishes set before you, you will gain an idea of their nature if you tell yourself that this is the corpse of a fish, and that the corpse of a bird or a pig; or again, that fine Falernian wine is merely grape-juice, and this purple robe some sheep’s wool dipped in the blood of a shellfish; and as for sexual intercourse, it is the friction of a piece of gut and, following a sort of convulsion, the expulsion of some mucus. Thoughts such as these reach through to the things themselves and strike to the heart of them, allowing us to see them as they truly are. So follow this practice throughout your life, and where things seem most worthy of your approval, lay them naked, and see how cheap they are, and strip them of the pretences of which they are so vain.¹²¹

Confront the source of these pleasures. Tear them apart, see what they’re really made of. All life is but a thin veneer painted over the coarseness of its true nature. After its brief respite, lifeless matter is reclaimed and recycled yet again. Human life reeks with “the stench of decay. Rotting meat in a bag. Look at it clearly. If you can.”¹²² See this in all things, to remind yourself of their temporary nature.

Pride, greed, and the fear of death can be similarly tempered. These desires, too, are all for what you can never obtain: satisfaction itself. Instead, does not satisfaction appear when you stop chasing it? (Do you not believe this because it is a cliché? What an absurd reason – why do you insist on judging everyone so harshly?) Pride is the elevation of self-importance over that of others. Yet on the scale of the earth you are nothing but a mole, and just as blind. Greed for wealth so useless and contradictory it actually leads to unhappiness itself, the very thing you sought to escape. And yet horrible crimes have been committed in its name. And the fear of death, a natural fear, easily exaggerated. Of all of these things Aurelius offers perspective

Asia and Europe: distant recesses of the universe.

The ocean: a drop of water.

Mount Athos: a molehill.

The present: a split second in eternity.

Minuscule, transitory, insignificant.¹²³

This passage is familiar: it promotes humility through making us remember our insignificance, and how even immense objects are nothing when viewed from above.¹²⁴ Yet here, it functions in a different capacity. Aurelius shows us the fallibility of our senses, how our minds tend to get carried away with making judgments. Although the ocean seems large to us, that is not fair to claim. All that can be said for certain is that we are small. Of course it follows that the ocean *seems* large. But it is all relative to ourselves. And such a position is dangerous, as Galileo would eagerly tell you from the confines of his house arrest.

In all of these matters, and countless others, you can find strength in abandoning what is uncertain or illusory. This happens to be most of what you now desire: money, recognition, sex, food, time. If you look at it in a clear, harsh light, these objects of your desire will no longer glimmer, but

burn with reflected light. “Like the baths – oil, sweat, dirt, grayish water, all of it disgusting. The whole of life, all of the visible world.”¹²⁵ None of these things belong to us, and we are owed none of it.¹²⁶ Instead, embrace what is real and solid. Accept reality with every judgment yet abstained.

How to Read

The most technologically efficient machine that man has ever invented is the book.

—Northrop Frye

The accumulation of mental models is impossible without reading. But reading is hard, so no one really wants to do it.

But it is not complicated. It is just a lot of it. And if you start at the beginning, which nobody wants to do – I mean, you come in to me now for an interview, and you ask me about the latest discoveries that are made. Nobody ever asks about a simple, ordinary phenomenon in the street. What about those colors? We could have a nice interview, and I could explain all about the colors, butterfly wings, the whole big deal. But you don't care about that. You want the big final result, and it is going to be complicated because I am at the end of 400 years of a very effective method of finding things out about the world.¹²⁷

Feynman is talking about science, but he may as well be talking about any other method of finding things out. It is a cumulative tradition, so you can always build upon the past and you are never alone. It works through a process of groups criticizing themselves to try and produce truth. Criticism, and many other reasons, makes both science and the literary circle of reading and writing efficient and high quality modes of truth production.

It follows that reading is the best use of your time, and therefore the best hobby. Like most good hobbies, reading gets easier and more enjoyable the more you do it, and the more you grow in skill. Books are containers for ideas, and because the value of ideas are measured by their relationships to other ideas, each book you read – past, present, and future – becomes more valuable to you the more you read. Your mind is all you have, and reading is

a considerable investment of considerable time and energy at a frankly ridiculous investment rate. That is, all the books you read this year have leant a monstrously positive increase to your understanding of the world. When you read another book your understanding will not only increase further, but all the time and energy you invested last year will suddenly be more valuable. It is as if you are speaking to your past-self, and giving him stock prices from today's newspaper. Reading does not just improve your future, it improves your past; the time you previously spent becomes more valuable the more you read because of the way that mental models interconnect in an ever-expanding network. It is as is what you are reading now is constantly being sent forward in a time-capsule to help your future-self. Reading is preparation. Better still, reading is both of these capabilities of time travel at once – and more, for reading unlocks and fuels life's greatest pleasures of conversation, writing, and contemplation.

Every time you like an idea, write it down. These brilliant ideas that you admire will soon become your own. You will train your mind to produce ideas. And the ideas it produces will be on the level that it is familiar with. So make sure that you're used to good ideas. Then, when you are swimming in good ideas and you come upon one that you wish existed, realize that it is within your power to make it happen. If you can make a great idea happen, then it is your obligation to pursue it to its completion. With enough effort, any idea can be executed and made great. Thus, everyone has an obligation to be fantastic.

As you read, you will also build a skill of writing. Writing is the regurgitation of previously digested ideas into new forms. The more you read, the more you'll have at your disposal. As for improving in the technical sense of writing, there are books for that – it's just a matter of putting in the time.^{[128](#)}

What is more difficult to develop through reading alone is a sense of style. Style is best learned through imitation, as exemplified by Ben Franklin, who is perhaps history's greatest imitator. After finding a passage he admired, he would sit down and try to reproduce it from memory. He would then compare his shoddy reproduction to the original, noticing where his instincts led him and where they fell short. He would then repeat the entire process until he had memorized the given passage.

You may object that this is not learning as we have just defined it, and you would be right. But after spending enough time with those great stylists, Franklin began to unconsciously adopt their style. It is how the phrases of friends and family creep into your own mind, making little sense to you and even less to others. Why those phrases carry such importance in our thought processes is not understood, but that they do is undeniable.

When I first came to the University of Chicago, the first assignment was to read the twenty-five small pages of Plato's *Apology*. I had no idea that this was the starting point, but it turns out that this small book (more of a short story, really) was the entryway into a vast world of ideas and thinking for its own sake. I was suddenly a member of a secret club, membership free and open to all, with two key prerequisites: to want to learn, and to know where to start. The knowledge that the *Apology* is the foundation of all of Western philosophy is not withheld from anyone. Yet it often went unsaid, or perhaps it was simply drowned out by a flood of more trivial information. Others had read it in high school, or stumbled upon it by themselves. But I did not, and I was beyond grateful to have someone tell me. And I was infinitely more grateful to crowd around a long wooden table on a humid Chicago

summer and discuss this fossil. Because the second prerequisite is more important, you have to *want* to understand. I admit, philosophy is often dry and unapproachable, or obscured by the barriers of language, translation, time, and cultural difference. After all, Socrates has not lived for over two millennia. So I urge you to find someone to discuss this with, preferably someone with their own inner fire already lit. This is why we go to school, not to learn directly, but to see what kind of person you become once you have learned. To be inspired by those further down the road than you, to point out that path to you. Once this happens, the act of learning becomes easy, almost mechanical. Then, it is just a matter of following what you know to be correct to its logical conclusion. So if you are alone at this point in your life, if you are in need of inspiration, follow this footnote to the full version of the *Apology*, and the questions I have provided.^{[129](#)}

Bighorn Basin

My brain's the cliff and my heart's the bitter buffalo.

—Modest Mouse¹³⁰

A cattle rancher lived alone with his three sons in Wyoming.¹³¹ His name was Mark and he walked with a limp from the war. Sometimes he rode the perimeter, repaired the fences, or guarded the harvest of barley, which would keep the cattle fed through the winter. Mostly, though, he kept the family together.

One day, his strongest horse broke through the fence and ran away.

As Mark repaired the twisted wire with some that was slightly less twisted, his sons lamented.

Without that horse they would be far less capable come harvest time. The beginning of the slim harvest window was only a few weeks away, and winter following soon afterward. A ranch in harvest time was a nexus of activity bookended by long periods of uncertainty. It took experience to determine the proper balance of waiting for the greatest yield yet not waiting too long to be surprised by a sharp, early frost. The old rancher, still kneeling, simply shrugged. His shoulders hurt these days. He had faced situations like these countless times on the plains.

His neighbors Paul and Eric road on horseback through the sagebrush beside the deeply rutted road. Mark winced as he stood, on account of his bad leg, and tipped his hat deeply to his neighbors.

Paul remarked on the broken fence.

Mark informed him of the situation, of which Paul and Eric, of course, already knew. They said that they would keep an eye out for the horse.

Immediately, Eric offered one of his own horses to help Mark with the upcoming harvest.

Mark declined their help. When pressed, he demurred.

It's neither good nor bad, he said, it is what it is.

And then, having finished repairing the fence, Mark excused himself. The three sons frowned, but held their tongues and followed their father back to the ranch house.

That night, Mark prepared and ate a simple meal of rice and beans, which he never tired of. Despite his sons' sober mood, Mark smiled, unperturbed. He retired early to read the same small book he always read, its ornamental gold leaf cover worn bare by use of ornamental gold leaf in all but a few places.

The oldest son was a hardened man for only thirty, his face worn with deep lines. He was the first to rise in the morning to release the cattle from the barn. Without fail, he rode the longest during the day, rarely returning before dark. The oldest son took it upon himself to correct for the unfortunate luck that his family had suffered. He decided to search for the missing horse, and that at first light he would ride out on his own. Before the first hint of sunlight broke the night, he awoke silently, having slept fitfully, and softly packed his things into a worn leather satchel, so as to not wake his brothers, with whom he had always shared a room. The oldest took his pack to the stable. There, his brothers were waiting for him.

The youngest son criticized his older brother's need to act in the face of uncertainty. The youngest son was different in this respect, like all siblings are. The youngest feared making matters worse of his own accord; this was his greatest fear: to cause a mistake or make an error, and to have to live with that unsavory past for all time. But mostly the youngest son was just afraid,

even afraid of being afraid, and this fear manifest itself in forms as varied as nervous tics, a reluctance to rise in the morning, and a soft stutter. Objecting to his brother in this instance was not brave, it was a way of reinforcing his learned helplessness.

The oldest son responded to his critic by calling him a coward. There was nothing the oldest son hated more than being stuck, unable to act. This manifested in almost a compulsion; the oldest brother decided, without fail, to do *something*. In this case, like countless others, he did the only thing he knew how to do.

The middle son stood back and did nothing.

The youngest son argued that when a horse goes missing it tends to return. This situation was no different just because the harvest was near. The youngest son spoke slowly, knowing all too well what he was talking about,

Your fear is clouding your judgment, the oldest said with the venom of frustration.

The oldest son ignored his brother, knowing that the youngest was right. Still, he still had to go. Action stood apart from logic, the oldest reminded himself as he drew the saddle straps. They snapped with fresh tension as his weight landed on the saddle.

The middle son wished him luck, which the oldest never failed to ignore, and then the oldest son rode down the rutted dirt road before first light. He would be gone all day and all night. And the next.

Unknown to his three sons, Mark heard the whole exchange. Mark was always awake before first light.

Mark watched his oldest ride out, knowing full well that this could be the last time his son kicked up dust riding down that old road. Mark knew there were only two conditions in which his son would return, reckoning

both his nature and how heavy the responsibility for the entire family weighted on him. Those conditions were with the lost horse or dead. And yet, Mark was confident in his decision not to make his presence known. Mark let his oldest ride away.

He thought of the fires that tear through the valleys and make dust from grass.

On the third morning after the oldest son's departure, a beautiful horse trotted down the rutted dirt road at first light. It paced by the barbed wire gate at the edge of the property, and stood there until Mark stepped onto the porch and noticed it silhouetted against the rising sun.

His strongest horse had returned. Mark welled with emotion, the horse an omen of his son's safety. Mark walked up the gate to the long driveway when the horse caught his eye – it was different than the one he had lost. Mark reached the gate and found no less than ten wild stallions and mares, led not by the lost horse but by that of his oldest. Mark's brow furrowed deeply, carving a familiar groove.

The neighbors writhed with jealousy at Mark's incredible luck. He simply shrugged,

It's neither good nor bad, it is what it is.

As the first frost snapped the tallest stalks of barley, the harvest began without the oldest son.

On the third day, he returned, his clothes stained with blood, mixed with dust from red rock and mudstone, riding in on the lost horse.

His oldest son's leg was broken, and he could hardly stand, let alone work. The family didn't have enough hands to finish the harvest, which was nearly here. The cattle rancher's neighbors attempted to console Mark.

Mark responded as he did before, It's not good or bad that this happened.

It resulted directly from my oldest son's actions, which I trust regardless.

The neighbors pressed further, demurring this incident as an incredibly unfortunate coincidence. Mark shrugged, I have no opinion on the matter. It's no more bad luck than anything else that happens – It's neither good nor bad, it is what it is.

They again offered some of their farm hands, which Mark sharply declined.

The neighbors gossiped that Mark loved his younger sons more. Mark knew, but didn't bother to correct anyone, because he knew that he loved all of his sons equally. Unfortunately, his sons took the gossip to heart, and internalized the neighbor's fabrications until – at least inside their heads – they became true.

The next day, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and a draft was rumored. All able bodied men were to be drafted. The oldest son would surely be exempt, but the middle son and the youngest were all but certainly going to see combat.

The neighbors remarked on the incredible coincidence of the situation, at once horrible to have to lose the two youngest sons to the draft, and also a great blessing that the oldest son would inevitably be pardoned on account of his broken leg. They gossiped that Mark had injured his oldest son on purpose to save him from the draft, because he loved his oldest the most. Mark didn't bother to correct them, because the fact of the matter he was at once relieved and deeply saddened at what had befallen his family. He was proud to see his sons fulfill their duty, in the same way that he and his fathers had also served. But he was saddened to know that this could be the last time he saw his younger sons. In much the same way, he was relieved to see that his oldest son would not need to serve, but saddened because of how this fact

caused his oldest son so much pain.

The oldest son writhed in his makeshift bed – the frustration of being unable to act, the shame of having made the mistake of searching for the lost horse in the first place, the guilt of seeing his younger brothers serve in his place, and the wounded pride of failing to fulfill that same duty, all followed from his mistake. He saw shame in his father's weary eyes where there was only love.

And so Mark and his two youngest sons had little time to come to terms with the reality of the situation. Whereas previously the timing was a matter of preemptively harvesting the crop before the first snow, the shadow of Pearl Harbor meant that the boys' labor was now at threat of disappearing. Mark decided that they would begin in earnest, even though it was still early, simply because waiting was no longer an option.

With the oldest son was unable to work, the additional horses were of great use to the effort. The wild horses turned out to be mostly strays, branded with symbols farms that no longer existed. They had likely been living in the vast public lands for at least ten years, judging by the teeth. With no owner to return them to, Mark decided to keep them. The handful of truly wild stallions in the group would have to be broken later, but for now they roamed the fence with the domesticated herd.

A poster typewritten in Courier appeared in town square. It confirmed what the whole town already knew – the US was at war and all able-bodied young men were to be summoned. The local boys would be picked up when the military caravan passed through, likely ending up on the West coast, in training for deployment to the Far East. It would pull them out of barley and cattle and into bunks and carbines. While their minds were already in California, their bodies were slower. What they earlier suspected now they

knew with certainty.

That night, the younger two sons met in the stable. The younger son was tired of taking whatever hardships life gave him.

The middle son stood silently, listening to his younger brother.

The youngest was tired of being afraid, and he was not going to die. He was finally going to do something. He put his saddle back on his horse, tired from the day's work, and tightened the straps one last time. Moonlight filtered through the open door and down the row of stables.

Mark stood in the dark, outside the barn door.

The middle son spoke calmly but firmly,

You're replacing one fear with another. This solves nothing. Let's finish the harvest and accept whatever happens. No one even knows we're out here, the government may not come for us.

The youngest didn't care about probability – the ability to act mattered more than any outcome.

So he did, riding out the open barn door and down the rutted road. Dust kicked up behind him and coated Mark's face, still hidden in the shadow.

The middle son stood stationary until the sound of hooves became distant. The closest train station was in Cheyenne, and even that only ran east-to-west and back again. There was no way he could ride north through all of Wyoming and Montana.

He'll either get caught or die riding, Mark said out as he stepped into the moonlight, placing himself between the middle son and the rutted road.

Mark's presence in that moment was one of the few times that the middle son ever remembered being startled. He walked toward his father and they embraced.

In the same way that he prepared himself for the worst when his oldest

rode away, and again when his youngest fled, Mark now prepared himself for a government jeep burning dust down the rutted road. They would come to take the son he now embraced, which made the departure of his youngest all the more bitter. The oldest son, unable to distract himself from his own pain, had not considered the possibility, or no longer cared.

The next day, only the second day of the harvest that would take at least four, the middle son and his father resumed work. The morning was cold and it was as clear as the sky that day that time was against them.

Can we last through the winter? The water's starting to freeze.¹³²

On the morning of the third day, snow began to fall, mingling with the dust. At first, Mark was unclear whether it was the snow or the dust was obscuring his vision. But the yellow lights of a government jeep emerged from the cloud all the same.

The middle son gave his father whatever small sum of money he had, asked him to take care of his horse, and left with the military caravan.

With that morning's frost, they would have to make do with only half a harvest. Mark spent long nights sitting next to his oldest son, reading his same small, worn book. The oldest son rarely talked, and never of any matter of substance. He said he couldn't remember the fall.

Weeks passed, maybe months. The cattle thinned but most would survive on the half crop they managed to harvest if it were rationed. The oldest son fared the same, eating less rice and beans with every day that passed. In the middle of winter, the oldest son stopped eating entirely. Mark began to plead with him, and the oldest son ate begrudgingly and said nothing.

From winter came the spring again, and what little snow there was drank quickly by the thirsty, warming earth waking from its slumber. The oldest son was on his feet again, although his old strength would never fully return.

Still, it brought Mark no small amount of joy to see him moving about on his own.

Mark could now sleep later, with his oldest now able to let the cattle out of the barn at first light. As the oldest would ride late into afternoon, sometimes even the night, Mark began his old habit of locking up the cattle at sunset.

Walking in from the fields, the cattle ruminating behind him in anticipation of the warmth and food that the barn always promised, Mark unlocked the barn. He stepped inside and turned on the light.

The oldest had hung himself from the crooked rafters of the barn, his shadow drawn long, stretched in two directions by sunset and worklight. Beneath him, a piece of paper. Mark had hardly the strength to read it, but he did. It wasn't a suicide note, but rather another letter typeset in Courier from the US Government. The youngest son was captured in Billings and imprisoned for fleeing the draft, and the oldest saw this reason enough to take his own life. Hay drifted in the stale air.

Mark could not say that he didn't see any of this coming. He only wished that he had gotten to the letter first, or been strong enough to save his oldest son. But the sad truth, one that Mark would never fully believe, was that he could not save his oldest son if he didn't want to be saved himself. This truth was made even sadder by the fact that, in spite of the truth, Mark would never forgive himself either.

Mark left the room and stood on the porch. The barbed wire gate was open, he noticed. Although his bad leg felt fine, suddenly his body felt weak. His legs buckled under him and he fell to his knees, weeping. Mark stayed there for a long time. The air was calm and still, tinted orange from the sun. He cried until a storm of new dust was kicked up on the rutted road. The

drifting dust cloud, burning with sunset, stung his eyes and dried his tears.

But the news that the jeep carried would bring fresh tears.

Trees from Ash

Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life. Now take what's left and live it properly.

—Marcus Aurelius¹³³

You are but a spark cast off from a burning log: lifted skyward in the heavy, heated air, twisting in eddies and currents, bumping into thousands of other sparks. Some fly fast; others straight; others hardly leave the ground. But all fade. Your life is but a bright and momentary flash in a vast emptiness. Just as quickly as the spark's light is cast off, it fades. Soon, you, too will fade.

Your life is as short as a spark. Compared to the fire the spark was cast off from, the spark lasts but a second. Similarly, from your perspective as a person watching the bonfire, the entire duration is only a way to kill a few hours before you surrender once again to sleep. How it pales in comparison to the duration of your life. And yet, when compared to the wood that was felled and chopped on the backs of men, your life is only a momentary blossom in centuries of growth, a frail flower on its tiniest branch, blooming but once in untold hundreds of generations of ancient trees. And even this most tremendous of images shrinks away when confronted with the cosmic forest, the shriveled nettles that litter its floor encompassing the passage of entire worlds. From this you now believe, not merely understand, but truly believe: when this world burns up, another will form out of its ash. On that scale, all of human history, or perhaps the entire reign of the pine tree's dominance over the other trees of the forest, or even the complete growth and decay of our earth as a planet, all of that will be but a spark flitted off of a universal

fire into endless night.

The molten core of a fire. Moisture evaporating so rapidly that the fibrous wood cracks and hisses, cool air above clouding with vapor, wind fanning the flame yet threatening to extinguish it. Wood, parched by flame, split by pressure – nature's axeman. You've seen cracks like this, these patterns, before: in sunbaked desert mudflats or floodplains dried after receding surge. The universal rhythm of nature reverberates endlessly. Soon the vapor burns itself out, and there is nothing left but charcoal and heat quickly absorbed by thirsty air.

This same fire burns inside of you. Fuel it.

When the fire dies, all that existed of the once great tree is now but ash. Yet this ash will grow countless other trees, some of which will be eaten by deer, others devoured by termites, and others still chopped and burned yet again. This endless cycle, this eternal reoccurrence, is a necessity. It is a natural extension of motion, which is the child of change.

Your life is a brief reprieve from the endless cycle. Your unique gift of life is expressed through your ability to choose. Your choice in this singular moment is your only expression of freedom. And yet, your choices only have any meaning against the backdrop of life's eternal reoccurrence. Use this: focus on the uniqueness of this moment when compared to the vast span of time that came before you and the span that will come after. Realizing this uniqueness fully is essential to actualizing your own freedom into something real. This is the same freedom we all feel. It is also how we all separate ourselves from all of the other lifeless lumps of matter pulsing with energy. It is at once intensely unique and deeply universal. It is how we can direct the short flash of our lives in a meaningful direction. Realize, now, that after

your brief reprise you will fade and your body will dissolve back into obscurity it once rose from. From that obscurity, new life will form. Your life is nearly over, so take the rest of it and live it well.

Be thankful for the ash that the trees grow from, for the same destructive force gives your brothers and sisters space to grow. For neither could come into being without its own destruction preordained, just as your grave will grow the plants that will feed your grandchildren's children, allowing their lives to flourish. From the cities we've burned, forests will grow.

The Social Animal

Look at who they really are, the people whose approval you long for, and what their minds are really like. Then you won't blame the ones who made mistakes they can't help, and you won't feel a need for their approval. You will have seen the sources of both – their judgments and their actions.

—Marcus Aurelius¹³⁴

To accept the imperfection in other people is essential to freeing yourself from the hold of negative emotion. It is a matter of tempering your expectations, learning to live with the flaws of others just as you learn to live with your own flaws. Until they no longer bother you or surprise you.

And so, too, must you not be concerned with their opinion of you. To not be surprised if someone takes what you say and gets the wrong idea. What can their opinion do to hurt you? The approval of others does nothing for you once you die. And it does equally little in this life. So why do you care so much about their opinion of you? Simple – we're programmed to live in groups. But that notion is no longer related to our survival, and as a result we can – and often do – go too far.

You no longer *need* to worry about what others think of you. It can be useful to, sure, and in most cases helps to trust your instincts and your evolution. Your social life demands this of you. But when differences of opinion occur or situations escalate, consider stepping back until you understand what's going on. Don't learn passivity, but learn understanding. It may very well turn out that you are justified in your actions or negative opinions of others. But more often than not, you will find out that your opinion is simply not necessary. There's nothing objective about it – you're submitting

to your ego in place of reason. If you're honest with yourself, the negativity is a product of your own actions. You can eliminate that negativity and be free of these negative emotions whenever you decide to.

Ill will is a positive-feedback loop with a grossly negative effect. If you look for mistakes in anything you will surely find them. If you look for reasons to dislike people, they're easy to find. To expect otherwise – that no one will ever act in a manner you don't like – is to hold a fundamental delusion about the way the world is. It is unrealistic. It is natural to watch others and see what they do, and even natural to be disappointed. But to judge their actions, to say that what they do is *truly* good or bad beyond a gut reaction you feel, is to entertain a delusion: that things should be the way *you* want them to be, instead of the way they actually are.

It's about power, and others are not within yours.

It's about control, and learning to give this up. Or rather, realizing that it was never in your control to begin with, and accepting that it's not. It's useless to try and control others. It's destructive to even try, and the moment that you attempt to, you become the aggressor, and your character is tarnished. Or rather, your character is revealed or made public, and in this clear light it is seen to be bad.

Bad actions stem from mistaken notions, which are always against what is good and natural in the world. In a way, it is not anyone's fault that they are mistaken about what is good and natural. It's up to all of us to figure out what that is, and once we do, to show others. Not in a demanding way, or through criticism, but to lead by example and to gently suggest when it's appropriate. Aurelius writes

So in each case you need to say: 'This is due to God.' Or: 'This is due to the interweavings and intertwinings of fate, to coincidence or chance.'

Or: ‘This is due to a human being. Someone of the same race, the same birth, the same society, but who doesn’t know what nature requires of him. But I do. And so I’ll treat them as the law that binds us – the law of nature – requires. With kindness and with justice. And in inconsequential things? I’ll do my best to treat them as they deserve.’¹³⁵

And so the fundamental distinction appears again: if another is mistaken and you are able to show them this fault (not for self-serving reasons or a desire to be right, but out of kindness for the other) and it is appropriate for us to do so, then we must. But if the matter is inconsequential, indifferent to anyone’s well-being, or if our saying something would be inappropriate given any number of factors, then you justly refrain. Aurelius is particularly insightful here – you know this thing is inconsequential; it doesn’t matter. So why do you keep focusing your attention on it? You already know it is inconsequential, so act like it and treat inconsequential things as such.

You can’t help that these things appear. You can’t change how other people are. But you can change how they affect you, “That sort of person is bound to do that. You might as well resent a fig tree for secreting juice. (Anyway, before very long you’ll both be dead – dead and soon forgotten).”¹³⁶

It’s your fault for trusting a fool. It’s your fault for expecting someone else to be at all concerned with your feelings. If they’ve shown you concern before, that’s their choice to do so. But at any moment they may revoke it. So you must be prepared, you must know how to be indifferent to the actions of others, if you choose. Reflect on how fickle your own mind is, changing and doubling back without good reason. Other people are like that, but less forgiving than you are of yourself. Instead of taking issue with the person themselves, take issue with the nature of the human mind, “How their minds work, the things they long for and fear. Events like piles of sand, drift upon drift – each one soon hidden by the next.”¹³⁷

This does not cheapen your relationship in the slightest. On the contrary, it allows you to fully appreciate each gesture. To truly understand and accept someone, including all of their faults is the apex of honesty. Anything less is delusion. “To feel affection for people even when they make mistakes is uniquely human. You can do it, if you simply recognize that they’re human too: that they act out of ignorance and sometimes against their better judgment. And that you’ll both be dead before long. And, above all, that they haven’t really hurt you. They haven’t diminished your ability to choose.”¹³⁸ You’ve diminished your own abilities – by dwelling on their actions, by letting them affect you, by losing sight of what is up to you and what isn’t.

Their mistakes point out what you shouldn’t repeat. Nothing more.

Leather

Give yourself a gift: the present moment.

—Marcus Aurelius¹³⁹

Buy a real leather belt. Wear it everyday. Watch it change with use.

Feel how this inanimate object molds to your body. What remarkable change it undergoes almost immediately, and what changes infinitely more subtle as the years go by. The years go fast and the days go so slow.

At the end you'll realize that objects don't change, you do. The belt is the same, molded to an older, larger belly, to a different body. And so the belt foregrounds truths that aren't immediately obvious: our repetitive interactions with a changing world, the passage of time, and of course how it was harvested from the skin of a cow (and how similar we are to the animals that we wear).

Every morning, as you lace the belt through its loops, it should greet you like an old friend. If you buy a well-made, full-grain, thick leather belt, you'll be able to pass it down to your children.¹⁴⁰ If enough people bought this, there would be no belts for sale in stores...only buckles and repair kits.

Every time you unbuckle your belt, reflect on the uniqueness of life. Our purpose – our remarkable capacity for thought – is at odds with our animal nature. Our ability to transmit these thoughts symbolically is our greatest gift as intelligent animals. Writing is a way to talk to your future self, and to the future of humanity. We are the animals that make tools, the animals that learn for the sake of learning, self-organize into groups, and – through the repeated use of writing – have internalized symbolic language until it has become indistinguishable from our thoughts.

But we hardly need to remind ourselves of this uniqueness. It is evident in the leather and the cloth that we use – harvest, really – from animals and plants to clothe our bodies. We borrow these things from nature, we can never take them away. For when we are done with them, they must return. And while this ability to harvest nature is somewhat unique, you should not let it delude you into separating yourself from the creatures you wear. It is also obvious in the buildings we assemble. It is obvious in all the extravagant groups we form: to dance; to eat; to vote; to celebrate.

Yet all of this goes without saying. What needs to be said is, often, the opposite of what we are familiar with. As Aristotle says, you often must over-compensate in a direction that you are lacking to settle on the desirable mean.

We need to be humbled, removed from our lofty position at the apex of nature. We are but animals, and we should keep bringing that thought to mind. We should mind and be reminded of our animal nature. This capacity for reflection occurs when we take respite from the world we've created. There is a moment when we exit the abstract, social world we've constructed together and instead reintegrate with the objective, natural world. These moments tend to revolve around, in some form or another, our natural functions – at once our most animal and also our most sincerely human – with our threads bare and actual selves exposed to the natural world. Are we not most human when we most fully embrace our neglected animal nature, thus collapsing our fragmented lives into one?

These moments occur when we are taking off of our clothes: removing dress shoes after work, to swim in an icy pool, wash away our sweat and hair in the bath, to exercise, to make love, to sleep, to shit. To strip away the facade of the mental world and instead glimpse the physical is to connect the

two and feel a third – the spiritual. It is no coincidence that all aspects of culture revolve around our natural functions. What an enormous amount of time we, as a society, spend eating! All the elaborate rituals we engage in: the festivals, elections, wars, and funerals. What great lengths we go to perform in the social world, and accomplish little at that. When we take off our clothes we also shed the conventions and clichés that we have created.

So when you take off your belt, remember. You are about to surrender your uniqueness as a person in society, and become, if only for a moment, a reasonable intelligent ape in the natural world. With these barriers removed, you can fully see yourself clearly. You can finally glimpse your animal nature for what it is: a part of you, one that occasionally surfaces and takes control for a moment (when you are extremely tired, for example, you often lose the ability to socialize). But once the necessary and natural desires are satisfied, your animal part subsides. Reject anything else. You need to eat to live, yes, but you do not need this or that food. So too with anything else. You do not need this or that. Reject any desire that is unnecessary, or unnatural. And those that are both unnecessary and unnatural are the most dangerous of all.

In this way, you can both check and celebrate your animal nature for what it is. You can question the practices of society, appreciate the wonder of the natural world – of which your body and mind are inextricably a part of, and turn off your mind for a moment. It is often the natural activities of walking, bathing, or drinking deeply from a well of water that calm us the most. They are a return to nature. Only then will you be able to see *your nature* clearly, without either indulging it or neglecting it.

You crawl out of bed in the morning and put on your belt again as you reenter the social world. You now realize that you are an animal, yes, but

that's not all you are. It is just a part of you, and it should never be the ruling part. You adjust the buckle, as you did thousands of other mornings, and are reminded of the cow that died for the ridiculous purpose of holding up your pants. You think about how that cow lived on grass, and, in doing so, fertilized untold future generations of grass. And you smile, because you are not so different from that cow. You leave your humble dwelling and set out for your proper occupation: working in tandem with the people of the world, like rows of grazing teeth, finely meshing and constantly worn down by their work, but remaining strong. You set out to approach the next patch of thorny problems with a renewed vigor – over and over again, if necessary – until the time comes to pass on that same vigor to the very people you worked so hard to help.

Death's Ritual

*Olives on the point of falling, the shadow of decay gives them
a peculiar beauty.*

—Marcus Aurelius^{[141](#)}

Being thankful is another way to trigger the thought that you can lose anything you currently have. So establishing a practice of thankfulness, a daily focused minute of gratitude, is a spiritual preparation for loss. You should entertain the idea of loss whenever you get the chance. It reminds you that what you have now is worth having, in a visceral way that's not accessible to you when you only rationally consider what you have through the course of your daily life.^{[142](#)}

Rituals are important. They signify a need for stability. They don't just exist in the physical world; they have symbolic meaning in our minds. In general, rituals point to the repetitive, stable nature of life. Each day that passes is very much the same as the last. Yet the most fundamental aspect of any ritual – its repetition – betrays itself. With each repetition, the passage of time makes it clearer and clearer that it will someday have to stop. With this realization comes a foreshortening of the increments until the ritual takes on a more sinister meaning, reminding us of our death. Through reference to death, rituals almost paradoxically come to represent both the temporary nature of life, and its stable repetition.

But isn't this true? Through your ancestors' death you came into being. Through the deaths of countless plants and animals we subsist together as a

species. Life is at once temporary and endlessly repeated; there is no paradox here. Thus, the notion of ritual as death doesn't need to be sinister. Death is not inherently bad, and reminders of its inevitability need not be depressing. Instead, you can choose to view death as a necessary part of the cascade of nature and all its forms of life. Without death, there could be no change. And without change, there could be no life. Life is energy directed, moving through countless bodies, repeated *ad infinitum*. Life is motion. It is a now a commonplace assumption that all life has value. Indeed, this is the fundamental basis of the notion of human rights. If this is so, and life is intrinsically valuable, then death, too, must be a necessary and positive experience. When you fully come to terms with death's inevitability, it is freeing in a way. It leaves you able to spend your life without fear, and with the urgency that death provokes.¹⁴³

Just as we can simulate loss to stimulate the idea of gratitude, we can contemplate death to appreciate life. When Socrates spoke of death, he was not embracing pessimism or cynicism. He understood its necessity, and the corresponding necessity of moral action, which is why he accepted his sentence in the *Apology*.¹⁴⁴ Through the regular, active practice of facing death in his mind, Socrates prepared himself for it. Of Socrates, Aurelius wrote

It's not enough to ask whether Socrates' death was nobler...What matters is what kind of soul he had. Whether he was satisfied to treat men with justice and the gods with reverence and didn't lose his temper unpredictably at evil done by other, didn't make himself the slave of other people's ignorance, didn't treat anything that nature did as abnormal, or put up with it as an unbearable imposition, didn't put his mind in his body's keeping.¹⁴⁵

The way that Socrates prepared for and faced death is a natural extension of the virtue he showed in life, the irreverence he showed toward indifferent

external things. And in the end, this virtue allowed Socrates to face death without fear. Although he would never admit it, fully accepting the eventual necessity of death proved that Socrates was, indeed, wise.

To cultivate this same honest wisdom in yourself, I suggest you wear a watch. There's no real need to anymore, with the time displayed on screens all around us. But the object itself serves a more relevant purpose than stopping you from being late to work. It is a physical thing, constructed and crafted with two purposes in mind: to keep the time, and to mold to your body. As such, it not only reminds you of the time, but that *you exist in time*. You have a physical body and a mind of unknown substance, both of which exist in the physical world definitively bound by the limits of time and space. We intuitively and easily understand the limits of space: through natural fears of speed, heights, and enclosed spaces. But it is a little harder to understand time. It slips away from us, eludes easy comprehension. You have to focus to perceive it clearly, and even then it is only visible for a moment before it slips from your consciousness once again. Wearing a watch can remind you that you, as a person, are bound to the steady and inevitable passage of time.

That time is limited. The watch wears down. While your mind is never tarnished by its interactions with the world, your body is. The watch rubs on your skin – the boundary between your body and the world – illustrating perfectly the limits of your body. That you are but matter. Over time, the watch might even stop working. It might break, stop, or be lost. That you, too, will wear down with age. You share the same fate as the watch you wear. May it drive you to do everything in your power to value the present and delay its passage, if only in your mind.

It also exposes the artifice of technology, that we create these objects and

put them on our bodies to distinguish ourselves from animals. But you already know that there is no such separation; we are but animals. To maintain otherwise a dangerous delusion. You can remind yourself of this merely through considering the strange perfection of the watch you wear.

Watches are often invoked as a metaphor to prove intelligent design. The argument goes: if you found something as complex and beautiful as a watch on the beach, you would assume that an intelligent being crafted it. Thus, the argument goes, animals must be designed as well, for they are similarly complex.¹⁴⁶

This argument backfires in exactly the same direction. With evolution now all but a certainty, a watch pales in comparison to the natural complexity found on that very same beach.¹⁴⁷ Forms of life as diverse as crabs, coconuts, and starfish hum with infinitely precise machinery. Our existence as humans is the ultimate deflation of the watchmaker analogy. For our miraculous minds and hands arose from the steady operation of such simple rules, and it was them that crafted the watch. Thus, the watch did suddenly appear on the beach, almost by chance. That it appears designed is because it is. And that nature appears designed as well is due to the same processes of pattern recognition, inherent to our minds and gifted to us by natural selection, processes which designed the watch in the first place. It is our minds' tendency to look at nature as designed that produces the weight of the watchmaker analogy. Once you realize that even this tendency – especially this tendency! – is the byproduct of natural selection expressed over time, it loses its punch. Because if we as humans, in all our complexity, have come to be through the simple passage of time, then a watch found on an uninhabited beach ceases to be impressive. The classic thought experiment is not disproved, but, rather, suddenly impotent. Thus, the watch on your wrist is a

healthy reminder of several facts, not least of which is your place in the natural world, and the remarkable machinery *beneath* the watch, the machinery in your wrist that the watch so desperately clings to.

You have to understand: the world is always changing. It only seems stable because you haven't been around for very long, and can't see much from your perspective. But even as you read this, your body is already falling apart.

Don't let this discourage you. Constant change is necessary and uncontrollable. But out of this change, you can rebuild what's left into a product of your own design. "The universe is change, our life is what our thoughts make it."¹⁴⁸ That is, matter is smashing into matter and breaking apart, grasping for stability like lovers. But any stasis is only temporary. The nature of everything is to change. You can't even drink from the same river twice, for by the time you are done taking a breath and return your mouth to the stream, it has already flowed downstream, never to be recovered. Knowing this: you can predict what will happen, where the river of time will flow. So be ready, and change its flow yourself.

A perennial problem in considering your own impermanence is the inevitable question that death provokes. An elusive question of life's meaning. When you die, will you continue on, be reborn, or dissolve into nothing but atoms?¹⁴⁹ It could be that the world is like an onion and we keep peeling back the layers until we get sick of looking at them.¹⁵⁰ It's entirely possible that there is absolutely no reason behind any of this. That underneath all the layers of reality there is simply nothing.¹⁵¹ No grand design. No other worlds. Just arbitrary laws and everything that follows from them, including us.

—So what now? Do you just want to pack up, go home, and sleep away

the rest of your life? If you weren't created for a reason, if there's nothing external driving you, then why bother to do anything?

Because any reason at all was never found outside of you, they have only ever been internal. You create your own meaning through choosing to spend your life as you choose. The void of change, the emptiness of flux, does not destroy meaning; it is precisely what allows it. Without change, there would be no space to create anything. The world be so stable as to be immobile. How delightfully boring.

So we should push our lives as far as they will go. If you sit and do nothing, wasting away in your hometown, your life *will* mean nothing, or at least much less when compared to the value you neglect to create for yourself. I can't make you see it, at a certain point you have to accept what's clearly presented in front of you. You have to learn to see what you'd rather not.

You're used to the cold inside of that block of ice you call your current, resigned life. You have to chip away from the inside. You have to get your blood pumping. And soon light will begin shining through the ice. Your body will give off more and more heat. And then the ice will begin to melt, and you won't have to work on chipping away anymore. And when you climb out of that self-imposed prison of passivity, you'll finally realize just how cold it was, and how much it was slowing you down.

An urgent impetus to action

Don't let yourself forget how many doctors have died, after furrowing their brows over how many deathbeds....

And all the ones you know yourself, one after another. One who laid out another for burial, and was buried himself, and then the man who buried him – all in the same short space of time.

In short, know this: Human lives are brief and trivial. Yesterday a blob of semen; tomorrow embalming fluid, ash.

To pass through this brief life as nature demands. To give it up without complaint.

Like an olive that ripens and falls.

Praising its mother, thanking the tree it grew on.

—Marcus Aurelius¹⁵²

This is your life and it's ending one minute at a time.¹⁵³

Hold up your hand to the sun. Feel the heat on your palm, and the light passing translucent through your flesh. Your blood runs red, just like everyone else's. All the soldiers and politicians and poets and shysters that have lived and died before you were even born.

Instead, return again and again to the fact of life. What an amazing thing, to be alive. To read this word on the page, to think. How remarkable the way the mind works. To notice yourself thinking, to go a step beyond that. To reflect on how strange it is that you even can notice yourself thinking. With each shift of comprehension more joy flowing from the simple pleasure of existence.

All of this reminds you that you're alive – and all that comes with being alive.

You're alive and that's why you're happy.¹⁵⁴

You're alive and that's why you're sad.

You're alive and that's why you're afraid to stop, to lose recognition of this amazing fact.

It's only natural – all of it.

Good or bad, you live inside your mind, so you make it so. To trigger this sense of urgency – the same sense, I might add, that you will soon face directly – imagine the moment in which you realize that you will die. Yes, you have that knowledge available to you now, but only in a rational sense. We are now concerned with a feeling more visceral. The goal of this exercise, as Aurelius says, is to better ourselves right now.¹⁵⁵

Visualize yourself on your deathbed with hours to live. What emotions will you feel? Fear, maybe. Regret, maybe. Satisfaction, almost certainly not. What kind of person would feel satisfaction at the moment of death if they feel life has been unfairly revoked, and too early at that? The trick is in the realization that life is no one's lot, not by right. To live, to breathe, to read these very words on the page is an extraordinary fact of the universe. Most of it is and will always be lifeless. Even to think the thoughts you are now thinking is a rarity beyond comprehension. And that rarity means that the ability to think is constantly at risk of loss.⁸ So when the moment of death is upon you, say not 'why me' or 'why so soon' but: 'how amazing I was here at all' and 'I am thinking now, so I have more to do'.

What will the moment of death feel like? The smell of old flesh mixing with the incontinence and cleaning chemicals of a hospital bed. The engine of your body running hot - straining, gears grinding without oil, and finally melting. This is the moment when the delicate machinery of your body can no longer hold off the slow, inevitable decay that all living things must accept. This is when your billions of tiny bees working in concert cannot keep

your body stitched together any longer. You will die surrounded by loved ones or truly alone - it is hard to say which is more preferable, to lose or to be lost - and when you die you will either dissolve into atoms or be released into the universal order that you were born into. In either case, it is nothing to fear. Only fear choosing to live a bad life.⁹ Bodily pleasures will fade even quicker than your memory of these words. So write words of your own and inscribe them on your heart, as here I have humbly attempted to do.

Or better yet, copy those of others and take them within you. Repeat them so often that you will take them to your grave. You don't need them as your epithet, you already have that, expressed through the incendiary letters of your life well lived. Then, you will have nothing to fear. Follow Socrates:

To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils.¹⁵⁶

With this fear of death dispelled, with the knowledge of your inevitable death not just understood but fully internalized, what is one left to do? Are we to mirror the Egyptians and stock rooms full of food for the afterlife? Hardly. If there is an afterlife, then those rooms of food will do your mind no good once it passes beyond. All you can do is work on your mind *now*. And if there is nothing beyond, then you enjoy the pleasant by-product of living your life with a new vigor, a mental fortitude gleaned from active practice.

With this in mind, whatever quantity of life you have left to live (for it is unknowable, and, ultimately, unimportant) takes on a newfound importance. C.S. Lewis speaks of this drive, this grace under pressure, and the characteristic activities of humanity in the face of death, in his case, the

novel invention of nuclear fallout

Do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the atomic bomb was invented: and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways. We had, indeed, one very great advantage over our ancestors - anaesthetics; but we have that still. It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because the scientists have added one more chance of painful and premature death to a world which already bristled with such chances and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty.

This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things - praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts - not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.¹⁵⁷

The fact of death, just like the fact of life, carries with it no inherent activity. No prescription for action. That is something you have to decide upon yourself. That is something you *get the wonderful opportunity* to choose. And you better choose, because it's only a matter of time until we all run out.¹⁵⁸

Frozen Feet

You see, one thing is, I can live with doubt, and uncertainty, and not knowing.

I think it's much more interesting to live not knowing than to have answers which might be wrong. I have approximate answers and possible beliefs and different degrees of certainty about different things. But I'm not absolutely sure of anything, and there are many things I don't know anything about, such as whether it means anything to ask why we're here, and what the question might mean. I might think about it a little bit; if I can't figure it out, then I go onto something else. But I don't have to know an answer.

I don't feel frightened by not knowing things, by being lost in the mysterious universe without having any purpose, which is the way it really is, as far as I can tell – possibly.

It doesn't frighten me.

—Richard Feynman¹⁵⁹

A wise man, bound by duty, found himself in the military.¹⁶⁰

At night he would walk and think on the outskirts of camp. Often he was paralyzed by tough questions, and knowing that he could not sleep with these questions left unresolved, he would walk until he came to some sort of answer. The night would be cold, and the wise man would return with dew frozen to his sandals.

This happened every night, and the wise man never complained. Those soldiers who were huddled around the fire complained more of the cold than the wise man who walked about. In fact, the wise man was seemingly impervious to all physical pressures. He could endure hunger better than even the hardest of soldiers, yet could drink to excess without a shake of drunkenness.

The other soldiers would scoff that he would spend all night pacing while they ate and drank and laughed. They said his head was in the clouds. The other soldiers laughed – how couldn't someone walk and think at the same time? They would yell to distract his thoughts before tiring of the game and returning to complain about the cold.

One day, the wise man stopped, frozen in one place. He had come across a particularly difficult problem – why bad things happen to good people – and his feet were absolutely rooted. It was late autumn and the evening was quickly approaching. The wise man would not return to camp before dark.

This man was Socrates, the first philosopher and also the wisest person to ever live. The same Socrates who choked the chicken in the marketplace. He was a soldier in the Athenian military in 300BC. He was a citizen of the first democracy. Socrates was strange, there is no denying that. But history has looked back fondly on Socrates because he lived in absolute accord to his values. He was undeniably consistent, even when it cost him his life.¹⁶¹ And in life, he lived in self-subjected poverty. Above all, he was and is a shining example of a human being – kind, rational, and generous – and one whose example we've strived toward ever since.

Socrates stood all night and all day. His feet were blistered with frozen dew.

Socrates unstuck himself the next morning and rejoined the march.

Now I ask you, why was he frozen in place? It was not that cold out. No, the freeze was internal.

The answer to this question is another question in itself, and perhaps the answer to the original question itself: why?

When you're lost, when you don't know where to go, is it prudent to keep going? I say no. It's better to stop and get your bearings. It's of no use

to drive aimlessly without a map. You'll likely go in the opposite direction and delay yourself further.

But Socrates knew where he was – within shouting distance of his troop's campsite.

Physically yes, but that's not the real reason you would pull over to the side of the road to check the map. The body is useless without the mind. You may think this is trivial, but push the trivial truth a little further, see if it holds up. When you are driving and suddenly realize you don't know where you are, is your body really so far from where it needs to be? No, what has changed was your mental impression of security in where you are and where you're going.

The same feeling is salient when you bolt awake at night, forgetting this or that. The mental feeling of security is what puts the body at ease. True, one needs a satisfied body – thirst quenched, hunger satiated, and tiredness relieved – to have a properly functioning mind. But those are merely prerequisites. What we're talking about now is a deeper truth – that psychological security is not a physical phenomenon. To *feel* safe is the mind's expression of a degree of certainty in its situation, and all the outcomes that the situation entails.

This sounds so simple, it almost makes me embarrassed to type it out. But it is vital. In much the same way that understanding the distinction between what is within and without our control is essential to dealing with hardship, so too is fully realizing that feelings of security, hope, and happiness are entirely within the mental realm is essential to the next phase of life. Understanding the discipline of control changes our perception irrevocably and for the better. Suddenly, with the clarity of the sun piercing the morning fog – what is outside of our control is no longer our concern. It takes practice

to internalize this intellectual truth into a lived truth, but the clarity never fades.

And so too understanding does *fully internalizing* that the beliefs you hold are entirely mental is integral to being freed from them.

We started with judgments, and now we move onto beliefs.

That is, when the essentials are taken care of and you are no longer ruled by fear, what comes next? The freedom of the mind. The search for truth. The rejection of anything uncertain, the refusal of the unexamined.

With this in mind, what can we say about Socrates?

His body was stuck, not because of any physical reason, but a mental one.

He was a full, consistent person. His actions reflected his beliefs, and his beliefs reflected his thoughts. So it was no accident (and certainly no symptom of antisocial tendencies) that Socrates froze in his tracks thinking about the problem of evil – he simply didn't know where to go. He was stuck: mentally, and morally, and, therefore, physically.

He didn't know why, so he didn't know where to go.¹⁶²

He simply didn't know what to tell his body, because his mind was not in order.

He was stuck.

This remarkable skill to get stuck was not a hindrance, despite his cold feet. Cold feet is the reluctance to commit to a something you're not sure about. Standing in that field, Socrates certainly had cold feet – but he never felt it. He only thought it, and his mental uncertainty reflected and reverberated all throughout his body. Socrates was simply unwilling to say 'good enough' when he did not know the full answer. Standing in that field all night is a sign of mental fortitude, a willful perseverance, a reluctance to accept incomplete answers or be satisfied until the work is truly done.

Socrates' feet were so cold, it's a wonder he ever married. This was the same man that said the unexamined life is not worth living.¹⁶³ I don't know if that's true or not, but I plan on finding out.

K(no)w Limits

Icarus. The original myth had two parts. Daedalus said to his son, 'I fashioned these wings for you. Two rules. Don't fly too high, or the sun will melt the wax. But, more important, son, don't fly too low. Because if you fly too low, the water and the waves will surely weigh down the wings, and you will die.' We've left out the second part of the myth. We don't say to people anymore, 'Don't fly too low.' All we do from the time they are 4 years old is warn them against hubris. We have created this industrially led structure that says: How dare you.

— Seth Godin

When you strip away what you thought you knew, what's left?

When you are left with something laid bare – dull, unimpressive, and indifferent – you realize that it can hold no power over you. Situations that seemed frightening or stressful become unimportant. They are replaced by a greater concern: for truth, clarity, and kindness – not in any grand sense, but only in regard to your own thoughts, decisions, and actions.

Just as the power of choice comes in saying 'no', so too does the greatest freedom come from the realization that there are no barriers. Everything is either unknown or possible. The precise moment when something can be considered is when it becomes possible. Willpower is indefatigable – it can be extended without limit.¹⁶⁴ Taken together, these two precepts destroy any conception of limits.

As you sprint through life, cast your gaze across the fantastic array of things once thought impossible. There was nothing inherently impossible about cars, or electricity, or the internet. Their detractors' eyes were simply too small. All of these concepts were once thought to be so, but now they are

common place. Powerful people, comfortable in their positions at the top of the then-contemporary industry argued that it could not be done. Likely, they were ranchers or horse breeders, as horses were the primary mode of transport, shipping, and communication. Perhaps they were saddle makers or carpenters also involved in this kind of economy; it's unimportant. They were comfortable, and they did not question why. That is why they failed.

They would argue things like: 'If a human went above 30 miles per hour, their head would explode.' Or 'information could not travel faster than a courier on horseback, because the human mind can't process that much activity.' The livelihood of countless people involved in the horse business would be put out of work if these new technologies of cars and electricity. But our heads did not explode and we can easily process Morse code through a telegraph.

The same argument has occurred throughout history. Even now, there are those who bemoan the rapid pace of information delivered through the internet, and that it has destroyed our capacity to remember. But Socrates made the same claim about the written word in 370BC – that the act of writing symbols on paper would ruin our minds.¹⁶⁵ The same claim followed typesetter John Baskerville when he debuted his namesake font – scandalously thin and curvaceous in a time of blocky printed blackletters – only to hear his critics claim that it would induce blindness. Benjamin Franklin embraced the new technology and claimed that thinner fonts aided reading, as we now intuitively know.¹⁶⁶ And the same is said for the internet: too fast, too destructive, unnatural, and therefore evil.

Or those who say the earth is nearing carrying capacity and cannot support many more humans. Thomas Malthus made a well-publicized claim in

1798, as the population neared one billion.¹⁶⁷ What Malthus ignored was humanity's remarkable ability to adapt. A trip to the countryside would do well to raise doubts about the space we have available. This combined with our inborn compassion paints a brighter future than you could get from reading the news.

Naysayers are nothing new. These claims have been made countless of times. They inevitably follow any new technology or population boom, because it is natural to be afraid of what's new. But what's novel is not necessarily bad. When you find yourself doubting, ask yourself not 'why' but 'why not?'.

A good way to internalize this skeptical attitude is through the three laws of Arthur C Clarke. Although Clarke wrote about science and technology, you can take a broad interpretation of the word 'technology' to include any new idea. Technology is but a tool, and all tools, even mental ones are technology. Clarke wrote:

When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.

The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.¹⁶⁸

And so as you sprint through life and encounter accepted impossibilities, see them instead as opportunities. Even better, opportunities that only you see as such. Because technology exists first in the mind. And as we know, any sufficiently advanced technology looks like magic.

And so you must watch your thoughts and catch yourself whenever you think something is impossible, because thinking that is to deny yourself the opportunity to think up new technology.

If the thought of ‘impossibility’ enters your mind, remember that by the time that word is even fleetingly considered, your thoughts will be interrupted by someone who has already done it.¹⁶⁹

When you think it’s not possible, remind yourself that it’s necessary.¹⁷⁰

The most skeptical among you will not have gotten far enough to read this words. So you are not as skeptical as you may think. But there have been philosophers who have doubted that even the simplest things such as our sense or our thoughts or other people could be known. This is to satisfy those nagging 5-year-old-kind of thinkers who may ask ‘why bother thinking?’. Or perhaps, your inner demons.

The answer to their question lies, again, in the values they hold about life. If you believe that things in themselves are worth doing, then that’s a good reason to practice thinking and the side effect that your life may be better in the future is a pleasant side effect. There is pleasure in the fight. There is value in the pursuit. Life is always worth living. Now that you have covered the basics of dealing with hardship and taking responsibility for what you can control, you will now learn how to make your life meaningful, and create value through defining your personal values.

PART III: AND THE PURSUIT

Choice

There's no reason in being alive if you're not happy. Don't be one of those people that walks around miserable, hating their life. You can change anything about your life that you don't like.

– Anthony Green¹⁷¹

Self-improvement is based in action. And action, you now know, stems from a hard-earned, learned freedom of the mind. They are so similar, they may as well be one and the same. Yet, paradoxically, action exists only in the mind. There is nothing external or circumstantial in how you choose to act. While no one can choose the situations they are presented with, your response, your call to action, is entirely within your control. Realizing this is the most important step. But executing on the realization is another story. So now we will work through strategies for breaking down what you already believe.

What separates the strategies to follow in this chapter from those in the last is, I believe, a matter of necessity. Whereas Parts I and II focused on internalizing the essential mental tenants, mostly learning how to bear the negative parts of life, Part III shifts more into the realm of action. With action comes the necessity of choice, bound up in situations often difficult or impossible. Precisely because your power of choice is codependent on your personal appraisal of your own character, the choices you make are a perfect reflection – not of your character just yet, but of your view of your own character. Only over time and in hindsight do our choices define our character. In the present moment, it is the image or ideal you hold of yourself that drives your choices. That is, you choose to be what you see yourself as. But

you can watch yourself and formulate your own ideal. Then, you can see your own change in yourself as you execute on these choices. It is entirely a matter of perception: much like dealing with desire, or anger, or pain, defining the type of person you'd like to become is dependent on your view of your own situation. Change your perception, and you can choose to change your life.

Mistaken beliefs creep into every aspect of our being. When our mind is not in order, we show it in other ways. It spreads like a disease. Error creeps into our speech – phrases like ‘you made me angry’, ‘I can’t win’, or ‘I can’t help it.’ I hardly need to say that the attitude here is defeatist. It stems from the fundamental distinction of what is within and without of our control. Others don’t make you angry, you make yourself angry. And others may present barriers to your success, but it’s your choice to accept them rather than to transcend them. We have dealt with these fallacies on their own terms. But they signify a deeper malaise, one that is even more insidious to perceive and infinitely more difficult to extinguish. That is, your delusion signifies your own desire to fail. It seems counterintuitive, but only because it is an unconscious desire. To desire failure is to actually desire a lack of control.

I have talked before about my great fear of losing control of my mind, my body, my life. This fear manifests itself in obsessions and anxiety that impacted my life. The great irony, and what I am ashamed to admit, is that I left my fear unchecked and let it develop until it became a reality. Because not doing anything was easier than failing, I let my greatest fears come true. Consciously I hate not being in control, but deep down I knew it was easier to do so. To cede responsibility for my own actions. To have something to blame my failures on, rather than taking responsibility for them. And so I let my fears develop until they inevitably became a real problem, and so I

could then fall back on this excuse. But this, although easier, only led to great pain. Through inaction, I chose suffering for myself.

No, refuse to embrace that kind of self-destructive behavior any more, “Everywhere, at every moment, you have the option: to accept this event with humility, to treat this person as he should be treated, to approach this thought with care, so that nothing irrational creeps in.”¹⁷²

I mean to say that everything is your choice. There is a growing trend in society to shift blame from the individual to external, societal factors. This is not a generational or even a political issue. Rather, it is a simple expression of our universal desire to excuse ourselves of blame. To forget is as seductive and addictive as any drug.

We always have a choice.

Please Shut Up

The distance between dreams and reality is action.

—Anonymous

This makes me angry. There are few things that make me angry, but failing to apply effort is one of them. And yet you keep doing this to yourself – why?

I could be a musician. No you can't. You either are or you're not, and if you're saying that, then you're definitely not. If you're a writer, show me your writing – or I don't want to hear it.

How many times have you told people what you're working on, only to have so little of it actually done? You know that exaggeration is a form of a lying. You should cherish your work, and to talk about it like that and exaggerate should make you ashamed. You should be ashamed to do it, especially in regard to your work. You should treat your work with the utmost respect, second only to how you treat others. So why is it that these areas are where you make the most excuses, and falter the most?

Don't talk about what you could do if you wanted. With talk like that, it makes it obvious that either: you can't or don't want to...in addition to making yourself seem the person who's all talk. It's embarrassing any way you look at it. Either do it and then talk about what you learned or could've done better or, better yet, leave the talking about yourself to other people. All the better to focus on the task at hand.

It's like sleep – you can close your eyes again and drift back to dreamland. But dreams are illusory, by definition. To get up is much more difficult. Like anything real.

Effort

All human actions have one or more of these seven causes: chance, nature, compulsions, habit, reason, passion, desire.

—Aristotle⁴⁷³

The interface between your mind and your body is a strange one. You know this from your many failures, and the countless things you do in spite of knowing better.

How easily do your thoughts and intentions get lost along the way as you try to put them into action? Why is this? Simple – if you don’t understand yourself, those intentions get lost before they can be put into action. To understand your own mind is to be able to do anything.

If effort is the physical effect of your will, motivation is the cause of your will. Motivation is simply the combination of all your thoughts and feelings as they come together. Mixed together, you weigh the decision and decide whether or not it’s worth it to apply effort. Complicating the picture further is the amorphous nature of motivation in itself. For as desire could be called a ‘simple’ mental process, I have never once observed a motivation of mine with either a simple cause or a clear goal. No, motivation must be a conglomerate of other, simpler mental processes. Referring to Aristotle’s framework above, motivation is primarily composed of reason and habit, but secondarily (inherent) nature, compulsion, passion and desire. That leaves chance, which I would argue does not directly influence motivation. Nonetheless, the role of chance is circumstantially significant, presenting or denying various opportunities which can influence your perception of your situation and your capabilities. ‘Can’ is the key word here, for as we have

covered, anything external need not influence your perception, although you may be habituated in such a way that to do so is almost second nature.¹⁷⁴

Nearly anything you do then occurs on multiple levels of your consciousness. There may be the rational decision to do something, but as everyone knows understanding that eating right and exercising will make you live longer is not enough to prompt action. At the basest level, you can force your body to do things through fear or necessity. I have in mind situations of real danger, such as when a winter hike goes wrong. The limits of your rational mind can easily be overcome in situations such as these, but it is unsustainable to rely on sheer force of will and intentionally applied stress.

Instead, reflect upon the difference between thought and action.

When you decide to do something, it is not the conscious, rational thought that moves your body. (“Thought by itself moves nothing.”¹⁷⁵) The movement itself occurs on a level slightly below that of conscious thought, but above that of animal instinct. Tell your body to stand up. Do it, now, for the sake of refreshing this idea in your mind.

You *decided* to stand. Then, in an almost imperceptible split second, your mind shifted that decision from a possibility to something to be *executed*. Almost like a computer program, the possibility for an enormous range of action already exists within you. It’s just a matter of activation. And on this most basic level of individual actions, it is little more than muscle memory. (You hardly needed to think much *while* you were actually standing up.) Once you had decided that you would do so, your mind executed a subroutine of sorts. It may even be fair to say that you were hardly conscious, or at least not acting consciously, *while* you were standing. Like throwing a baseball, or riding a bike, simple physical actions become more difficult the more you think about them.

Habit shares much in common with muscle memory. It is a memory of a deeper kind – a refreshment of what was previously rationally deliberated upon and which no small amount of will and effort was spent coming to a decision. So the trick is to commit to something and practice it – slog through it at first, really – until it becomes second nature. (As in, until you decide to change your nature, and your secondary, willful nature *becomes* your inherent nature.) Then, it will require no effort at all.

Effort is difficult at first, before a habit is formed. Even Marcus Aurelius had difficulty getting out of bed in the morning:

At dawn, when you have trouble getting out of bed, tell yourself: ‘I have to go to work – as a human being. What do I have to complain of, if I’m going to do what I was born for – the things I was brought into the world to do? Or is *this* what I was created for? To huddle under the blankets and stay warm?’

—But it’s nicer here...

So you were made to feel ‘nice’? Instead of doing things and experiencing them? Don’t you see the plants, the birds, the ants and spiders and bees going about their individual tasks, putting the world in order, as best they can? And you’re not willing to do your job as a human being? Why aren’t you running to do what your nature demands?

—But we have to sleep sometime....

Agreed. But nature set a limit on that – as it did on eating and drinking. And you’re over the limit. You’ve had more than enough of that. But not of working. There you’re still below your quota.

You don’t love yourself enough. Or you’d love your nature, too, and what it demands of you. People who love what they do wear themselves down doing it, they even forget to wash or eat. Do you have less respect for your own nature than the engraver does for engraving, the dancer for the dance, the miser for money or the social climber for status? When they’re really possessed by what they do, they’d rather stop eating and sleeping than give up practicing their arts.

Is helping others less valuable to you? Not worth your effort?¹⁷⁶

Effort is a matter of motivation. Dispel the idea that you have limitations, or inborn tendencies. Limits are either unknown or breakable. In both

cases, the answer is the same: begin. Even if you are a complete beginner; the master in anything was once a novice.

Identify where you have problems with motivation. Is it doing too much or too little? Often you need to overcompensate to reach any kind of balance. When are you more likely to have troubles with motivation? Often it's moments of physical or mental tiredness, such as first thing in the morning or right after work, in which we are most psychologically impaired. When you struggle to direct your own motivation, consider, instead, what is motivating you in that moment. Better yet, consider what you are in that moment. Not in any complicated way, but just in a general sense in this brief moment of reflection. What part of you is ruling? Which part is subordinate? Are you being pulled around by your body, or are you doing the pulling. I will hazard a guess: nearly all of your problems have to do with subduing your animal nature in favor of your more rational one.

You are a (reasonable) intelligent, bipedal primate who has stopping fighting long enough to build buildings and farm food with others in relative security. The mere ability to sleep-in in the morning is a marvel of human achievement in itself, so treat it as such. It's unnatural to sleep in, and your body (understandably but mistakenly) wants to binge on that gift. Your animal nature threatens at every moment to become your only nature.¹⁷⁷ So be on your guard, and always remember: we are but animals. You are nothing more.

Ask yourself each morning: when I lie on this very bed for the last time – when it finally becomes apparent that this is my deathbed – what will I think of? Will I look back at life with regret? What did I want to do more of? What did I want to become? A writer? A business owner? A dancer? Begin that activity today – no, better yet, do it now!

Do It

If you're tired of starting over, stop giving up.

—Shia LaBeouf

It's never going to be perfect, and realizing that is part of trying to do anything. Going in, you have to accept that, otherwise you will always be disappointed. It's a continual process, and the rewards are continual also. Dispel any sense of results, and instead constantly hold *action* in your mind as the end of every decision. That is, be satisfied with acting in a manner you deem correct and fulfilling. Fake it at first, if you have to. But over time, you will get a sense for the *process* instead of the *result*.

It is not just your ability to shape your life, it is your responsibility.

This is the true process of value-creation. Creating value for yourself and others through effort is hard, satisfying work – and the goal of all life.¹⁷⁸ There is intrinsic pleasure in the thing done for its own sake, the actual *doing* of the work. Bees don't question their purpose as they build the hive – it's already implicit in their every action. In the morning, bees don't hesitate to get up and contribute to the hive, even if they have to build it.¹⁷⁹ Nor has any ant ever confused the pleasure of sleeping in for the real value of work.

So why do you fall to a temptation that even an insect can overcome?

Incendiary

What it lies in our power to do, it lies in our power not to do.

—Aristotle¹⁸⁰

A fire burns inside all things. As Seneca writes, “The soul carries within itself the seed of everything, that is honorable, and this seed is stirred to growth by advice, as a spark that is fanned by a gentle breeze develops its natural fire.”¹⁸¹ This inner fire – your soul – is the energy you expend every day. It’s nothing mystical, nothing more than time that must be spent. You can choose to spend it this way or that. But you have a limited amount. So you better spend it correctly. All action necessarily stems from this finiteness of life. And sometime soon, that flame will flicker and die.

This is the same fire that is inside all natural things. Energy flowing from one thing to another, never destroyed. Not that the plants or the cows think like you and I, but that we are all connected. That these natural bodies pass from one form to another quickly. That the form you now inhabit – the physical structure of your body – is but a moment of stability before inevitable collapse. You must prepare yourself for this. Rather than bemoan that life has a limit, disdain your impulse to. Don’t despise your flesh for its limits but, rather, the self-imposed limits you have already placed on your mind. You already intuitively know that it is the prisoner ignorant of his position that is most hopeless. It’s time that you stopped merely knowing this and started believing it yourself. So that you can begin to act upon it. That is: you already have this small flame inside of yourself. But knowing this, why do you still waste it?

Just as a lack of air will cause a flame to wither, so, too, will a strong gust

extinguish it entirely. Too little change is as dangerous as too much. So, too, like any challenge that you may face. Choose challenges that are always of an appropriate difficulty so as to encourage your growth, and not to leave you discouraged. This, however, is dependent on choice. A choice you make inside of yourself. If you do not make it, any challenge will seem impossible. Instead, you must choose to redefine a barrier as a hurdle. A choice to accept that progress will be slow, but it is always cumulative. A choice to be satisfied with clear judgment, justified belief, and action – alone.

You have to assemble your life yourself – action by action. And be satisfied if each one achieves its goal, as far as it can. No one can keep that from happening.

—But there are external obstacles...

Not to behaving with justice, self-control, and good sense.

—Well, but perhaps to some more concrete action.

But if you accept the obstacle and work with what you're given, an alternative will present itself – another piece of what you're trying to assemble. Action by action.¹⁸²

Action is not merely the building block of your life, it is the mortar, too. The first actions are difficult and have a comparatively small impact. But they are absolutely essential to what is to come. The actions that follow are much easier and do much more than the earlier ones. But they are predicated on the earlier actions nonetheless. This is the logical structure of habit, a pyramid built on its own foundation, action reinforcing action.

Even the most blazing fire is built from the bottom up, so to speak. A single spark ignites kindling. Then individual twigs and leaves are added to burn bright and quick. Only then can smaller braches be added. But even

at this point the fire will only last a few minutes. The delicate initial flame must be protected yet also given space to grow. It must be given fuel – and not just anything, but fuel appropriate to it. Then and only then will real logs catch. And then, they'll burn for hours and hours. It's much easier to keep something going than it is to start anew. Even as you go to sleep at night, and wake up in the morning fog, the coals will still be hot enough. They will be able to easily reignite, and just as bright as the original. It is easier to get started the second time. And even when those descendent fires burn out, countless others will be borne from their ashes.

Looking at their cold, dark ash, you may say that the flame is gone.

But the fire, remains.^{[183](#)}

Habit

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.

—Will Durant on Aristotle¹⁸⁴

You tell a lie. You consider yourself, like all people, a truthful person. In this instance, however, you happened to tell a lie; an action which you do not believe to be characteristic of your true nature. You do not consider yourself a liar. But you are.

For what is a liar other than one who lies? How many lies do you need to endure in others before you consider *them* a liar? Ten? Five? One? Apply this same standard to yourself; you are no different from them. If anything, you should hold yourself to a higher standard than you expect of others.

You cheat. You are now a criminal.

You steal. You are now a thief.

Beware when you do these things, for you become the kind of person who does them. Not gradually, but suddenly and absolutely.

No one would deny that a single act of arson makes one an arsonist. Or a single murder makes one a murderer. Yet you make excuses for yourself simply because the acts are less severe. But the principle behind it is no different. To excuse yourself from an unsavory title like 'liar' is worse than dishonesty; it is ignorance of the full extent of your own dishonesty.

The same goes for the other end of the moral spectrum. How easily you claim different titles: I am a writer, an athlete, a musician. Yet you neglect the very activities that would qualify you for the title. A title is not earned through talk; but action. It is the daily activity that molds you into what you

claim to be. I have never heard of a writer who writes as little as you do. You are disgracing all the other, real writers, with talk like that.

This is not to discourage you from writing, but from talking. The truest writer would write constantly and encourage others to do the same, without judgment. Their encouragement to others would be out of respect for their craft, not in reference to their own work. From the realization that everyone benefits when each individual betters themselves and flourishes to the fullest extent. The selfless notion that we are all citizens of a cosmic city. To ask of each thing what is its “value to that world as a whole and to man in particular – as a citizen of that higher city, of which all other cities are mere households.”¹⁸⁵ That is what you must ask yourself as you determine your course of action, at this moment and every other moment. For what is your future but a constant succession of moments in the present. You need that kind of urgency, always at hand.

Think of the liar, the criminal, the thief. They pursue their craft with such vigor. The vain man who loves recognition; the woman hungry for power; the child desperate for attention.¹⁸⁶ None of them could ever be called lazy, especially in regard to what they do. The accusation becomes incoherent. They are defined so strongly by their characteristic activity that it bleeds over into their identity. The thief is far too dedicated to stealing for him to imagine life without it. You should pursue virtue with the same fervor that as a criminal running from the police; a sprinter on the track. You should wake up with the focus of a thief in the midst of a heist. You should love doing your work as much as the miser loves money. Remember, your work is not your means of earning a living, but your principle activity in life. Einstein worked on his own math on his lunch breaks at the patent office, be-

cause that was what was truly important to him. You should base your identity on this kind of work. It should be what you live for, until it comes to define you.

You know how to bring about this state in yourself. Habit begins with a single act. The sooner you start, the faster you will grow; it is exponential. Like anything that grows exponentially, it will appear slow at first. But soon growth will become effortless.

In all processes of growth, a time will come when you tire of it; the pace is no longer slow, but the returns are suddenly unimpressive. You are bored; discouraged. The problem is internal, rather than external. This boredom is the source of relapse into old habits. The addict is never compelled; he compels himself.

These critical moments are often called ‘turning points’. Aristotle referred to such a state as one of ‘akrasia’, or that of acting against your better judgment. It is similar to the concept of ‘bad faith’. It is when you are not ignorant of the consequences, yet you do it anyway. It is knowing full well how late it is, and staying up anyway. During these turning points, be hard on yourself. Talk degrades your ability to act. Success floats on the gaseous words of talkers. They are worse than failures, for to fail you had to at least try. Whenever you try, even if you fail, you always learn something.

If habits become hard to maintain, you can cut through the boredom through renewing the sense of urgency you once felt at the start of the process. Reflect, remember, recognize: lying does make you a liar. Every step takes you closer. Even one step takes you there.

Resolve

Things have no hold on the soul. They have no access to it, cannot move or direct it. It is moved and directed by itself alone. It takes the things before it and interprets them as it sees fit.

—Marcus Aurelius¹⁸⁷

Teddy Roosevelt was born a frail, sickly child. Every night he would be startled awake by the constriction of his throat – asthma attacks. As Seneca experienced, the feeling of suffocation is as close to death as can be easily experienced. It robs us of nearly all of our rational capacities, engaging the survival instinct. Roosevelt’s body threatened him constantly, and there was nothing his doctors or parents could do to stop the attacks. Facing a life of frequent, intense asthma attacks, Roosevelt became naturally timid and anxious. This mindset carried over into his physical state as well, draining him of the natural confidence available to all.

The solution was a strange one, almost paradoxical. Roosevelt asked himself: what is the one thing I need to improve to become a better person? It was clear: his body was holding him back. But the body is controlled by the mind.¹⁸⁸ So Roosevelt willed himself to action. His mind set his body to work. He would build his body.

Roosevelt had a great love of nature, something that would prove indispensable in overcoming his bodily ailments. As early as age seven he was trapping, collecting, and preserving animals and insects for his own private ‘museum of natural history’. His family traveled often, and young Roosevelt was surprised to find himself an adept hiker.

At first, exercise was extraordinarily difficult for him; exercise exacerbated his asthma, producing the very sensation that he had grown to fear. At times he was in actual danger of suffocation. But Roosevelt came upon a surprising revelation: with time, exercise eased his asthma attacks. With the urging and support of his father, Roosevelt began a regime of intense exercise that he would follow for his entire life. When his father died, Roosevelt doubled his efforts in his memory, focusing now on his shortcomings in school in Harvard College. But his love of nature and exercise soon became one and the same, as Roosevelt led expeditions, opened ranches, refocused the National Parks system, and became one of the greatest Presidents of the United States, seemingly through grit alone. In many ways, Roosevelt was stronger having endured and transcended his health problems, had he never experienced them.

How can we possibly explain this remarkable reversal? Science suggests that regular exercise expands the airways and lowers the resting heart rate. Not to be ignored is the therapeutic effect of nature itself, and the relaxing flow state that meaningful personal activities can produce. But I offer a different, complementary interpretation: the resolve required to exercise was in itself beneficial, in a manner more psychological than physical. It seems to me altogether more potent to approach essential activities of this nature not as a hobby, but as a necessary process of personal change. They are, in a way, directly related to your survival.

Exercise for Roosevelt was especially difficult, given his condition. The resolution to embark on such a process needed to be strong, almost primal in its urgency. Drumming up this resolution and following through on it seems to be the bulk of the work. Once he resolved to change himself in this way, he began to apply effort to the task at hand: exercising and feeling the

same familiar sensations of fear and a closeness to death. However, the heightened sense of purpose likely changed the meaning of these sensations, from one of fear to an identification of weakness, and a point of attack. The mere effort required activated a drive deep within Roosevelt – a drive that was previously buried due to fear. But was it not precisely the fear of suffering an asthma attack that prompted the attacks? Overcoming the fear itself would then be the only thing that could ease the attacks. Such is the twisted, paradoxical logic of anxiety. Often understated is the psychosomatic effect of anxiety – the unconscious activity of the mind controls the body, your mental state altering how you feel and act without your consent or even your knowledge. This is why issues such as anxiety are so difficult to treat directly. Only change that is self-prompted, internal, and deeply personal is likely to have any meaningful or lasting effect. But once this change is undergone, the change is miraculous. The curing of the issue itself seems only a pleasant physical side-effect of another, more positive mental change.

Take responsibility for building your body. Take responsibility for building your mind.

Tough and Competent

The mind's requirements are satisfied by doing what we should, and by the calm it brings us.

—Marcus Aurelius¹⁸⁹

Perhaps the greatest example of focused resolve in action is the American space exploration effort. While NASA has always dealt with funding and bureaucratic struggles, they did not hinder its excellence. In hindsight, NASA at its peak was one of the most effective teams of engineers ever assembled. But it wasn't always this way. In 1967, a simple test of Apollo I caused a cabin fire, killing all three crew members Chaffee, Grissom, and White. This great tragedy was a national embarrassment for NASA.

Teach yourself to focus, as if your life depended on it. (It does.)

The flight director and overall manager for the Apollo missions was Gene Kranz. His speech to flight control in the aftermath of the crisis would redefine NASA:

Spaceflight will never tolerate carelessness, incapacity, and neglect. Somewhere, somehow, we screwed up. It could have been in design, build, or test. Whatever it was, we should have caught it.

We were too gung ho about the schedule and we locked out all of the problems we saw each day in our work. Every element of the program was in trouble and so were we. The simulators were not working, Mission Control was behind in virtually every area, and the flight and test procedures changed daily. Nothing we did had any shelf life. Not one of us stood up and said, "Dammit, stop!"

I don't know what Thompson's committee will find as the cause, but I know what I find. We are the cause! We were not ready! We did not do our job. We were rolling the dice, hoping that things would come together by launch day, when in our hearts we knew it would take a miracle. We were pushing the schedule and betting that the Cape would slip before we did. From this day forward, Flight Control will be known by

two words: ‘Tough and Competent.’

Tough means we are forever accountable for what we do or what we fail to do. We will never again compromise our responsibilities. Every time we walk into Mission Control we will know what we stand for.

Competent means we will never take anything for granted. We will never be found short in our knowledge and in our skills. Mission Control will be perfect.

When you leave this meeting today you will go to your office and the first thing you will do there is to write ‘Tough and Competent’ on your blackboards. It will *never* be erased. Each day when you enter the room these words will remind you of the price paid by Grissom, White, and Chaffee. These words are the price of admission to the ranks of Mission Control.¹⁹⁰

This speech came to be known as the ‘Kranz dictum’, and it still carries that authority. Kranz would direct all odd-numbered Apollo missions going forward. His pedigree includes directing the first successful human spaceflight Apollo 7, the spiritual successor to Apollo 1. This would be enough for most anyone – correcting the earlier mistakes and fulfilling the original mission statement – but Kranz continued. Apollo 9 saw the first manned flight of a Lunar Module, and Apollo 11 was, of course, the first moonwalk. But Kranz’s legacy and legend didn’t form from any of this. No, Kranz would later win the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and virtually every award NASA offered, for his direction of the Apollo 13 near-disaster. Kranz was lead flight director at the time and his flight control team was on duty when an oxygen tank aboard the service module exploded, effectively stranding the crew in the attached command module. Apollo 13 was heading toward the moon with the intent to land, but the explosion crippled power and life support capacity. Kranz’ team calculated the rates of air and power consumption. They would not be enough. The engineers designed carbon dioxide scrubbers that the astronauts could fashion themselves out of spare parts. The astronauts complied and shut down emergency systems in an effort to get back home. But

it was not the quick thinking of the world's smartest engineers that saved the crew of Apollo 13. It was the words Kranz spoke three years earlier that constantly reverberated through the minds of every member of NASA, from the chalkboards of engineers to the monitors of flight control to the assembly workshop.

If it was not for those early failures, there would have been countless more. You never see the disasters you avert. You never see the future mistakes you correct for.

Failure is not an option;¹⁹¹ it is a requirement.

Digestion

Whatever this is that I am, it is flesh and a little spirit and an intelligence. Throw away your books; stop letting yourself be distracted. That is not allowed. Instead, as if you were dying right now, despise your flesh.

A mess of blood, pieces of bone, a woven tangle of nerves, veins, arteries.

Consider what the spirit is: air, and never the same air, but vomited out and gulped in again every instant. Finally, the intelligence.

Think of it this way: You are an old man. Stop allowing your mind to be a slave, to be jerked about by selfish impulses, to kick against fate and the present, and to mistrust the future.

—Marcus Aurelius¹⁹²

Go get a carrot.

If you don't have one, don't read this until you do.

I'll wait.

Now eat it.

Carrots are not only a wonderful food for overall health, they aid digestion. That is, the absorption of necessary nutrients and water.

And how remarkable the physical and chemical processing of those base materials into you. Yes, the carrot now grinding between your molars will not only constitute the repaired and replaced parts of your physical body, but it will quite literally become *you*. Your identity – who you think of when you think of yourself – is but a little flesh, a little air, a lot of water, and a sprinkle of mind to control it all (or try to, anyway).¹⁹³

Again, more clearly: look at the carrot you now hold in your hand. It is separate from you; it is something we earlier determined was definitively

without you, outside of your control by virtue of its status as an external object. Yet as you shear it off with your premolars and begin to chew it, something strange happens. It is wonderful, how the simple act of chewing can remind you that you are living. It is even more wonderful to have this thought. Rest, for a moment, in the pure pleasure of existing; whole, unperturbed, and satisfied with the simplest of pleasures: chewing.

As your teeth grind down the carrot, consider more fully: when does it stop being just a carrot, and become *you*? Your cells are replaced every seven years, swapped out with cells entirely from your food. This means that your sense of self – your mind – is recreated and refreshed constantly, with every bite. Yet, looking at the carrot you now hold, it is hard to consider that this strange orange object will soon not just be inside of you, but become *you*. If you consider the hand that holds the carrot, there is no doubt that it is a part of you. You can control your hand; it follows orders; it feels; it cries out in pain. But how much more strange to consider that that hand will soon be made of up the solid, lifeless carrot it holds. Not in a trivial sense, but actually and entirely. At a certain point in your digestive track, the parts of the carrot will become reanimated, reborn with the force of your life. Although the parts will no longer belong to the carrot itself, they will pass, impossibly, from lifeless to living. A zombie carrot. That is the miracle of digestion.

When, exactly, does what you eat become a part of you? Is it ever fully a part of you? You identify your body as yourself, yet what is your body but a mixture of your parents' genes, your mother's breast milk, fruit, grain, and flesh? And out of all that food meaningfully arranged in your body, somehow you now possess a mind complex enough to read these words? This essence of life, this energy, is constantly cycled through millions of different bodies, recycled again and again? None of these parts alone can accurately be

called 'you', yet taken together you're forced to admit that they and only they compose you in your entirety.

If your sense of personhood is composed of what you ingest – if you, quite literally, are what you eat – then what does that say about you? Is the vegetable you now hold in your hand somehow still alive, days or weeks after harvest? Is the flesh of the chicken still lifeless in the freezer? Or, if you deny this, then you must accept the alternative: that your entire, living self – the hands that hold this book, and, as you read these very words on this page, the thoughts that bounce around your mind – your body is composed entirely of lifeless plant and animal matter. That the life we everywhere see is an illusion borne of complexity, and the distinction between living and non-living is simply a fault of our perception. Both possibilities seem untenable. In either case, what we call life seems to come from a strange arrangement of lifeless parts, or from nothing at all.

We can agree that, at the very least, most of the carrot will, in one way or another, form, what will eventually be, your body (if not more of *you*). But when it is digested? When it first enters your mouth, or maybe the moment you decide to eat it? Perhaps even the moment when you were born, or when you were conceived? No, it can be none of these definitively; there are arguments against every one of them. The answer must more complex than this – arguably as complex as the unique and puzzling nature of ourselves: feeble minds trapped in the bodies of reasonably intelligent yet easily deceived animals.

These ideas, like many of the others that we have explored together, appear to be simple or obviously true at first glance. But upon closer examination they lose their simple, solid character and reveal more and more of their

complexity, until uncertainty overwhelms the overall impression. Paradoxically, the harder one tries to digest ideas, the more complicated they become. The more they are worked on, the tougher the texture becomes, and the more difficult they are to digest. But working through them is the only way to ever internalize these ideas. The paradox can be overcome through brute force, but it is difficult and slow going. It takes time, and you must hold them inside of you for quite a while, and constantly doubt yourself to get any value out of them. It is painful work, in a way, to work with ideas. But the value of doing so is self-evident, and undeniable. For your own sake.

When you fully digest these ideas – that you are but an animal; that most everything is outside of your control; that who you are is constituted wholly and entirely by your actions; that each and every decision you make forms your habits, which composes the vast majority of your time, which makes up the entirety of your life in hindsight; and that someday you will truly, suddenly die – you will find that there is grandeur in this view of life, in the inevitable contraction of the seemingly endless span of life you've yet to live into an instantaneous limit when viewed in hindsight. The view from your deathbed is exaggerated and foreshortened; all the more reason to press on now.

Yet knowing this as you now feel it in your gut, you would be a fool to ignore the sense of urgency. So act on it. Don't just strive onwards and upwards in empty aspiration; resolve to focus, and then execute on your resolve. Act until it becomes habit and you quite literally become your aspirations, until the everyday fabric of your action is woven into the splendid, hardened fiber of your being.

When all of this is fully digested, your skin grows all the thicker and becomes a kind of armor against the uncertainty of the world. When food

is digested it becomes a part of your flesh, but when ideas are digested they become who you are, in the truest and most full sense of personhood.

Premolars

I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer.

—Aldo Leopold¹⁹⁴

They're bones walking on hooves. Flesh rotting off the bone until the legs can't hold themselves together. Splintered ribcages stretching skin. Armies of wandering deer. Walking corpses already wasting away.

The end of the world had the most humble of beginnings, when a pack of wolves devoured little Morty, a teenager hiking in the Catskill mountains. The real tragedy was not his death, but the ensuing hunt for the killer wolf, followed by every single member of the wild canines. People have always killed wolves out of fear, but now they were slaughtered in spite and mania. In high school they teach you that everything in nature is related. But it never quite felt real until the last wolf's howl was forever silenced. This was not the first time humans have ordered an extinction.

Unchecked, deer populations flourished. They stripped natural land bare until there were no fields or forests left. Then, in order to survive, the deer were forced to leave behind their characteristic timidity. We were alarmed when they chewed our lawns to shreds, crowded our highways, and ventured into cities, but not nearly alarmed enough. A drive on the interstate was avoiding several deer per mile. Bodies littered the road, and you often couldn't avoid driving over them. Antlers snapped beneath tires underinflated for this purpose, and the fragments ground into the asphalt until it was marbled, like the cows that we ground up and fed back to themselves to get this nightmare going. They say Mad Cow disease was the precursor to

whatever this hellish strain is. Cervids aren't that different from bovids, you know, and we should've seen this coming. Those with trucks started attaching their snow plows, even though it was summer. And sometimes, a passing herd would bring traffic to a stop. Stopped before the thousands of pounds of stampeding venison, your eyes traced their path: crossing from one side of what was once a dark forest to the other. That forest was suddenly light and hollow, devoid of all vegetation. You could see right through the trees: a sharp grazing line carved at the height of a reaching neck, picked clean of anything green. It was just bare trunks and dirt for miles. The interstate stretched a boundary line between the two halves of the dying forest, hot asphalt scorching earth, sticking to hooves, and melting the bodies that were trampled underfoot. The long tendrils of the road stretched to Toronto, where every country dweller crowded out by the herds is retreating to. The deer have reclaimed the country, so now we crowd the cities. When the deer exhaust one forest, they swarm the next. So too, when one city shrivels up, a band of human nomads heads to the next.

No one took it seriously at first. Then the gravity of the imbalance dawned on those in the Northeast. Slowly, then all at once, the survival effort mounted. It became a matter of national security that we organize to stop the spread of the diseased deer. Within a week they had already spread as far south as Virginia. The efforts of individual towns proved powerless to stop the flow. A kid with a bolt action rifle in a clocktower could bring down hundreds of deer in a day, but there are only so many bullets left with the country in shambles. If anything, our efforts at hunting have made the remaining deer more cautious – breeding them to enhance their natural instinct. This is an adaption that the buffalo never learned, and its cousin the

deer is ornery about it. To circumvent this behavioral hang-up, we tried capturing deer, training them, and covering them with pheromones before releasing them out into the wild again. There, so our plan went, the trained deer would herd the wild deer to slaughter. It was like a traitorous general planning a spectacular failure for his army. Judas on four legs. But we couldn't keep any alive long enough to complete the training. And fall came and went, lowering a fresh layer of foliage to feed their short, hungry necks. But it was not enough – only a few sprays of water in the arid desert. And the deer were already beyond parched.

I've watched emaciated deer stumble and grind their teeth for weeks now. The air is getting cold. It's nearly winter now and without any ground cover or new saplings, the trees are all but dead, too. When the trees begin to fall, newly accessible limbs only further compound the problem. The soil began to wash away with roots to hold it together. A new dust bowl.

You can spot a diseased deer easily, just by their aimless movement. The healthy deer that remain are fast, quiet, and travel in tight groups, trying to guess which valley the rain – and its grass – will visit next. These healthy deer check each other obsessively for signs of disease. They've begun casting off the weak, those whose skin begins to fester, or those who start to stamp the ground like Mad Cows. Or so the rumors go. Some say that the disease is purely physical, others, that it's neurological in origin. I can't remember what happened to the Mad Cows, but I can't trust the rumors.

I once spent half a day tracking a healthy herd to the rusted railway depot down in the valley. I remember carrying my son when his knees got weak from jumping rocks to descend. He had constant headaches, but was remarkably well-spirited. His knees dug into my sides, which were not much bulkier. The people who are left are much like the deer that remain: gaunt,

thin, and sinewy from the endless dance of trailing the falling rain. My son was a constant reminder of the fragility of human life, in some ways even more precarious than the world we disrupted so. That is, until he, too, wasted away.

I have no one left but you, probably some stranger who stumbled upon this note years or decades from the time I write it. Trust me when I say there was a world that was alive once, and there can be again. My life is all but over, but I want to believe that you, or perhaps your children, will live in towns or cities again, instead of constantly moving. If stupid Morty decided not to hike that day, maybe go bowling instead – remember bowling?, then none of us would have to. This can't be undone anymore, but you can still restore balance. Rebuild.

Now, my son is long gone. While my body was stronger than his was back then, I can already feel my mind beginning to fail. Just last week I thought I saw the unspeakable. The thing about these diseased deer, is they have a ravenous hunger but can't keep any weight on. It just melts right off of them. That's why they look like skeletons – they burn constantly with the fear of starvation. For some, it's a reality. But last week, the deer I saw – I can't trust my eyes anymore – I swore I saw one eating the bodies of its dead brothers.

You can't trust humans anymore, either. The nightmarish rumors that circulate like stale air. Last week when I left Syracuse, there were whispers of people who couldn't keep on weight no matter how much they eat – they said the disease had spread to humans, and that they were trying to keep it from spreading out of the hospitals. I don't know if it's true, but that's when I knew it was time to leave. Nature has a way of balancing unchecked populations, and I fear we're next. It's only a matter of time until we all run out.

I see now that there is a delicate balance to all things, and that the slightest disturbance can have disastrous consequences. The smallest shockwave at the top of the food chain reverberates all the way down. Through the roots and into the dirt. I can already feel the balance of my mind growing more unsteady, and am I afraid what that will do to my body. The smallest part of me – my mind – oversees everything beneath it. My mind is one of the last wolves, living off the rocks in the subalpine – the final howl before endless silence. It is the only thing I can still control in this nightmare, and without it, I have nothing. I will protect it, as long as I am able.

No Small Difference

In a word, acts of any kind produce habits or characters of the same kind. Hence we ought to make sure that our acts are of a certain kind; for the resulting character varies as they vary. It makes no small difference, therefore, whether a man be trained in his youth up in this way or that, but a great difference, or rather all the difference.

—Aristotle¹⁹⁵

It makes all the difference how we are brought up. But your upbringing is something outside of your control. It is even in the word itself – to be brought up is something that happens to you. Food is carried out of the car and brought up the stairs to the kitchen. Being brought up is passive, not active. Water is brought up from the well; it has no choice in the manner.

You already know this line of reasoning – that whatever action is more active is more within your control, making it within your power, and therefore your responsibility, to execute that action more fully. The converse is true; if you fail to execute on an action that you know to be just, then you are wholly responsible for that failure. All of this is true, and it cannot be repeated enough. But there is another important sense in which upbringing matters.

Aristotle, whose quote opens this chapter, differed from the Stoics on many points, most of them theoretical and of little consequence. For us now, however, one is crucial – the acknowledgement of social factors in regard to character. You’ve surely experienced this narrative before: the poor, young man had a rough childhood, so it’s no surprise that he turns to crime. It is an easy, powerful, and seductive story to tell. Upbringing correlates so

strongly to morality that it may as well cause it. It makes sense on some level. But we both know this isn't entirely true. Think of how many brilliant young people have transcended their difficult upbringings, emerging stronger and kinder than any of us who have been gifted with more.

—You don't have half the problems of your ancestors. And what problems you legitimately face are needlessly overstated. Yet you yourself still fall back on the fact of bad luck. As what? Only an embarrassing excuse.

Overcoming all odds, earning your own freedom, fighting to preserve the core, base goodness that we are all born with (that goodness only disappears if we let it be corrupted, or if we corrupt it ourselves) – these are examples of self-actualization despite external circumstance. Such heroes directly disproof the helpless, defeated notion that the way you were raised *caused* your current character. For have not vicious people – the racists, sexists, and classists of the world – tried their absolute hardest to ruin the lives of their targets? And this hate will always fail; for the remarkable human ability to resist corruption, steel against misfortune, reverse decay, and transcend hardship comes from within you, never without. Alone, you can still be impenetrable. This loving resilience is stronger than any hate. And when this love extends to families and communities, it grows yet stronger.

—Yet entire communities are targeted, often at no consequence. To make matters worse, great people from bad situations are seldom recognized. Indeed, they are often hated and hunted even more fervently for their goodness. The wise man is seen as a threat to the city of thieves, so they will eliminate him, if they do not corrupt him first.

That is to be expected; it's obvious that this would be difficult. All great men and women knew it would be, and they would not have it any other way. The sole fact of the difficulty they transcended is enough to make them

great. But there is something internal, too.

Don't get distracted – we are concerned now with the issue of education. Think of how diverse the backgrounds and educations of your heroes are, and how eerily similar their goals. They hold a vision in common and are thus united by it, not just to each other, but to all of humanity and to a deeper, more universal order, too.

This kind of vision – a fundamental, deeply moral vision – cannot be taught; it must be learned. How many kings and tyrants have tried and failed to raise their children in a manner worthy of their succession? If greatness can be taught, then all the power and money in the world cannot reproduce it. How many sons and daughters failed their parents' expectations? And how many orphans had everything taken from them, only to smile ever wider? It defies logic; there is no simple relation between upbringing and virtue.

It must come from within, never from without. And how variable internal nature can be. Yet despite this, internal nature is always up to the individual; it has almost nothing to do with how you are brought up.

This was Aristotle's essential point. How delicious the irony of his life becomes. In spite of his teachings, Aristotle was hired to tutor not just Alexander the Great, but most of his future generals and would-be world leaders. You already know this story; it ends only in bloodshed and suffering. But know now that it was not for lack of trying. It is simply impossible to pass on this kind of knowledge. Even the most valiant attempts fall short.¹⁹⁶ The closest we've come has been in the philosopher kings Alexander the Great and Marcus Aurelius. Both fell dramatically to external factors; the rebellion of the chaotic world against a bastion of purity and stability. And when they fell, men of similarly splendid education killed and died over the scraps of their empire. Both failed to pass it on to their successors: Marcus Aurelius had

a vicious son in Commodus, and Alexander's Empire crumbled through infighting. Education means nothing when it comes to character, and character is the only thing that matters.

No, this kind of vision can *only* be learned firsthand, and never in comfort. The fires of experience burn hot and dry; you must endure great pain to pass through them. Pain without meaning is useless. Yet we know nothing in nature is without purpose or function. You feel pain to learn from it; only when you fail to do so does it become truly without use. And that would then be entirely of your own accord.

There can be no progression without this experience. It is essential. Why you would deny yourself that opportunity is beyond me. And for what alternative? To pass away your life in willful ignorance; to rest aimlessly in sloth and eventual depression; to watch yourself decay into obscurity; to indulge the pleasures of the body and become nothing more than an animal; to submit wholly to 'luck' or 'fate' and to decry the same force that you so desperately embrace. This is true suffering. It is a deeper, more complete sense of pain than anything physical, and one I fear you may never fully recover from. Don't start down that road, for by the time you find where it truly leads, there will suddenly be no outlet.

No, you live the life you lead. You have to try, you at least have to try. That is to say: those who choose to pass through the fires of experience always will. Once through and looking back, they would never describe their life as one of suffering. For suffering ceases the moment that pain acquires meaning – and life's meaning is unlocked through the necessarily painful trials of experience.¹⁹⁷ This is because pain is fuel – an opportunity to act and to change. Aurelius writes,

But when [people] obstruct our proper tasks, they become irrelevant

to us – like sun, wind, and animals. Our actions may be impeded by them, but there can be no impeding our intentions or our dispositions. Because we can accommodate and adapt. The mind adapts and converts to its own purposes the obstacle to our acting.

The impediment to action advances action.

What stands in the way becomes the way.¹⁹⁸

All externals help until they hinder. Then, they can be discarded as irrelevant, which all external things are in actuality. But even when external things appear to hinder you, they really just point the way. They show where energy needs to be focused. They identify points of self-improvement. Pressure always cracks the weakest point, and so the whole structure is strengthened the most by reinforcing that point.

All of this is to say that the pain of actually applying effort – waking up early, working hard, and avoiding unnecessary things – is superficial and minimal compared to the real suffering of failing to apply any at all. Don't walk gingerly across the coals; sprint.

By the time you inhale the bullshit and exhale an excuse, someone stronger than you has already overcome the very thing you demur. That person may as well be the better version of yourself – a ghostly image thrown from your chest, quickly diverging from your path and already pulling ahead. You lose a part of yourself each time you experience that – and every time you repeat the bullshit that you hate hearing from others. Soon, you might even believe it yourself.

The secret, as Aristotle says, is that you are responsible for your own up-bringing. Education can't change your character; only reflection and self-education can do that. And so much the better: while you will forget what you learned in school, self-education lasts a lifetime. Your present actions fade into your past actions, which compose your habits – and from the quiet

view of your deathbed – which form your life as it has passed you by. So by a simple process, always persistent yet so gradual as to be imperceptible, a succession of moments which form actions which form days which form years which form a life. At every step in the simple process, you can fault external circumstance for limiting you. But we both know the arguments against external factors. At every step in the simple process, you can fault your former self. This may be justified; perhaps you did make mistakes. But to acknowledge mistakes and yet keep making them is far worse than remaining ignorant of them. And suddenly you realize the heavy truth: that at every step in the simple process, you acted in a way to make you who you are now. Over many years and through countless actions, *you* formed your own character, for better and especially for worse. You have inherited your current self, and all its afflictions and issues, from your past selves. And at every step of the way, you solidified a little more of your future, and closed off just a few more options to your future self. Thus, your current faults are entirely your responsibility.

By a similar logic, we can hardly fault the addict in his current state: they have lost sight of what is good, to the point that they can no longer make correct decisions. And yet we can fault the addict for *getting* to their current state. And we can certainly fault the addict for knowing what outcomes would follow from their actions, knowing that it was wrong but thinking it wouldn't happen to them, and then doing it anyway. And you, from an external position, can clearly see the countless points where they went wrong. And yet, you behave like the addict, in a way: knowing what is wrong and doing it anyway.

This is because it is hard for you to visualize the life you have given up. All you can see is your current life, and it is not so bad. But imagine, if you

will, that tonight when you fall asleep you encounter a stranger in a dream. They immediately start reprimanding your behavior. They call you selfish, lazy, and afraid – and in a way, they are right. Yet you watch them after they walk away, and they behave in much the same way they just criticized you for. You become invisible and time elapses quicker and quicker. In this dream state, you can watch them for days while remaining unseen. Slowly, you become horrified: at their indulgences, their vices, and how much they are dragging their feet. Suddenly, it becomes clear – the eyes, the hair, the posture: this is you. Their indulgences are identical, the magnitude of their flaws amplified yet at a common wavelength to those you see in yourself. A different, degenerate version of your current life, with all of your flaws exaggerated until they overwhelm your character and drown out what's left of anything good. In this nightmare of an alternate universe, you see yourself if you had done just a bit more than you do now. And you don't like what you see.

Yet you – right now, reading this book to try and better yourself – this is what *you* must look like to the best version of yourself. That is, the best version of yourself is asleep on the couch, dreaming that *you* are yelling at them, projecting your flaws onto others, yet behaving no differently. Right now, *you* are the degenerate version of what you could be. And until you do what you need to do, you will remain that way. What would you give to trade one spot up, to the better version of your life? Potentials are invisible but ever present, and they can only be actualized and seen through action. Restated more clearly, *action is potential actualized*.

Think in terms of potentials – can you afford *not* to try your best? What ghostly image of your other self speeds away from you at this juncture? What future will go yet unlived? If only you could make it so...yet you can. Whatever you would give for this alternate reality, decide to give it now.

The View from Above

Asia and Europe: distant recesses of the universe.

The ocean: a drop of water.

Mount Athos: a molehill.

The present: a split second in eternity.

Minuscule, transitory, insignificant.

—Marcus Aurelius¹⁹⁹

The Earth is unimaginably vast. An entire life committed to exploring it will inevitably fail. Our oceans are nearly uncharted. Every day, species previously unimagined are discovered. Its oceans could not be moved in a thousand lifetimes of constant effort. (But what is an ocean but a multitude of drops?²⁰⁰ Our great oceans are but drops of water on a cosmic scale. The multitude of particles in the cosmic ocean dwarfs even the most gigantic of earthly images.) Yet even the nearly unimaginable size of our Earth has a definite limit. And somehow life, again and again, settles into the same forms.

Thus, any astounding fact is inevitably tempered by a deeper realization – our world, however great, is but a tiny point in a larger sky.²⁰¹ The time we spend is temporary and small. Why bother entertaining this notion of scale? To remind you both of the insignificance and of the incredible significance of the peculiar nature of your life – and both at the same time.

Astronomer and 4-time degree-holder from the University of Chicago, Carl Sagan knew first hand of the incredible dwarfing ability of the stars. Sending out the probe Voyager, Sagan looks forward to when it can turn around and take a picture of Earth. But even though he knows this will be an interesting picture, Sagan is nonetheless floored when he sees it

Our planet would be just a point of light, a lonely pixel, hardly distinguishable from the many other points of light...

But precisely because of the obscurity of our world thus revealed, such a picture might be worth having. It had been well understood by the scientists and philosophers of classical antiquity that the Earth was a mere point in a vast, encompassing cosmos. But no one had ever seen it as such....

There is no sign of humans in this picture, not our reworking of the Earth's surface, not our machines, not ourselves. From this vantage point, our obsession with nationalism is nowhere in evidence. We are too small. On the scale of worlds, human are inconsequential. A thin film of life on an obscure and solitary lump of rock and metal.²⁰²

At first, this view from above reveals the insignificance of lives. On a cosmic scale, our thoughts and actions are worse than insignificant, they are utterly inconsequential. But that is not to say that they are meaningless. Rather, the terror of the view from above is a pedagogical feeling, in much the same way that any other fear can be tamed and used to deepen our understanding. There is a reason for this fear. Our survival hinges on an insane urge to maintain our relevance, as individuals, as a family, and as a species. When our lives are viewed from above, this terror manifests as the fear of death, and of extinction. To surrender to the void, to empty and become wind. The view from above is to consider the world without yourself, a thought which no one, however, selfless, can seriously entertain. It is to surrender your identity as an individual to that of a humble member of a hubristic species

Consider again that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives...on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those

generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot.²⁰³

Internalizing this humility is in itself valuable; it puts the trials of your life that you worry about in perspective. But there is another sense in which this feeling of insignificance is valuable. Fully realizing this insignificance allows us to set fear aside for a moment, and freely consider the feeling for what it actually is, devoid of anything subjective. This is only possible when you can strip away false impressions and personal judgments, which takes discipline. This more pure feeling of insignificance can be described as wonderful and awesome, for the view from above is full of both

Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. Like it or not, for the moment, the Earth is where we make our stand.

It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. It underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the only home we've ever known – the pale blue dot.²⁰⁴

Insignificance prompts a deeper understanding, very much like that gained from facing death without fear. Surrendering to these necessary, uncontrollable facts of life, reveals a kind of peace, previously obscured by the mad rush of animal drives and emotions. For realizing the insignificance of your lives does not deprive it of meaning. On the contrary, meaning can only be created when there is a space devoid of expectation and waiting to be filled. To fill this space yourself, with choices of your own design, is to actualize the inherent potential available to all life. To rest in reason itself, and for its own sake, is a kind of spiritual stability. It is this sense of wonder that the Stoics

urged us to cultivate – wonder on a cosmic scale.²⁰⁵ Aurelius said it succinctly, “the Earth as a whole is but a point in the universe.”²⁰⁶ It is a view that can only be seen from above.

Colossal

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour*

—William Blake²⁰⁷

You are walking on the rocky beaches of a Great Lake with your best friend. It's the middle of summer and the sun has just set, but the sand is already draining heat from your bare feet.

Sand sucks. It's just little rocks.²⁰⁸ Why is there so much?

You remember hearing once that there are more stars than there are grains of sand.

Filtering a handful to gauge the fact, the moonlight reflecting off of the water's surface catches the falling grains as they fall, the full extent of how densely packed even a single handful is becomes apparent as it drains through your fingers. The beach suddenly seems long.

A blue glow lights up your friend's face as you ask what sand they're counting, anyway.

Visible sand? Underwater sand? Underground sand? Who knows.

Still, that's a tremendous amount. The beach seems small as you trace its slope down from the beach house and into the water. The water washes across your feet, pulling the beach with it as it recedes. It's now apparent just how far the beach must continue under the water's surface and along the bottom of the lake. Maybe all the way to Canada.

I don't know, I've only been to this one beach, and just thinking about that makes me feel a little lightheaded. How many thousands of beaches are

there that I'll never see? The scientists' have worked all of those into their estimates, I'm sure. Maybe even the ocean floor.

There's no way to count, either. Just guess using math. How much longer would you need to live before you would start counting sand? You know how they say fruit flies live for less than a day? That's how I feel when I think about trying to count buckets of sand.

No, that's mayflies. But yeah, their lives seem short and pointless compared to ours, but if you speed up a video of a city once or twice, we don't look all that different. And we have this knowledge about the mayflies, and we don't live any differently because of it. I doubt living as long as a tree would change anything about human nature.

Think about it this way: the past is inaccessible, and the future is unknown. The only moment we ever experience is the present moment. And the precise moment when you recognize you're in the present, it passes by. Focusing your attention on it makes it disappear. From that perspective – the only perspective – the past and the future don't exist. We can only ever experience the present.

With that in mind, death only robs us of the present moment, nothing more. When the time comes, you may argue that you could've lived longer. But you don't have any clue how much you have left, even now. All you can be sure of is that – right now – the succession of moments is still happening. It makes no difference whether a person lives ten or a hundred years more, because they lose the same thing the recognition that they're alive. Nothing else is guaranteed.

You don't believe me. You've always had trouble with this point. Ask yourself – can you lose more than you have?²⁰⁹ Use a real example, anything. Can you lose the job that was never yours to begin with? No, one must first

have something in hand before they can lose it. And what a slim margin of things we can truly hold – our thoughts, our actions, and only in the present moment. We can never hold the future until the moment it becomes the present. And the past is beyond recall. Following this line of thought, we can only ever have the present moment. So the present moment is all we can ever lose. Thus, I repeat – it makes no difference whether a person lives ten years or a hundred, because everyone loses the same thing at the moment of death.

You're probably right...but still – it's not so bad to set aside a moment to count out some sand. It's true that we can't access the future, or recover the past. But they can help the present. When you think about the expanse of time you'll never live – stretching out behind you and in front of you, compressing your life into a single slat on a transcontinental railroad – it makes you realize: to have any time at all is an incredible gift. When I realize how small a sliver of time I've been allotted, it doesn't make me sit down and give up, it makes me want to stand and move.

You remember hearing about the great Redwoods, and how some are still alive. How even fifteen men can't link their arms around the largest. A column that wide, extending straight up further than most anything we've made. How much wood is in just that one tree? I can't even imagine.^{[210](#)}

There used to be trees twice as large as even the monsters we have now – trees like rockets – but we cut them all down.

We must seem like flies compared to the great trees of the world.

My phone says it's true – they're more stars than there are grains of sand. No less than ten times as many.^{[211](#)} It seems that's a pretty comfortable margin, even if you count all of the underwater sand.

Wait – never mind. That's only counting stars we can see. Like, the visible night sky. There are *ten million stars* we can't see *for each and every grain*

of sand we can.²¹² That's one hundred million night skies, each filled with as many stars as there is sand in all the world's beaches. If only our eyes were good enough.

You begin to get that out-of-body sensation, as if you had forgotten to eat all day, when you think too much about how small you really are. It's scary, I think, because we're not designed to fully consider things at this scale. Not for more than a few moments. So when we force ourselves to, our mind reels and rebels.

Don't worry, you can find that many stars in just a few drops of water. Each drop of water has so many molecules that you need maybe ten or twenty to outdo the number of stars in the universe.²¹³

I can't comprehend a number that large. In a way, it seems no larger than any of the other numbers.

I can't either. That's why we use these images and metaphors to try and wrap our heads around them. It's a question of approximation. Kind of like visualizing infinity. I can't do it directly. You're supposed to be able to get the same feeling from imagining a hotel, infinitely tall, packed all the way up. And every night, everyone moves up one space to accommodate a new guest – you can always go one more. When an infinitely long bus shows up, you could just repeat the process over and over. Or you could tell each guest to look at their room number, square it, and go to *that* room. But, honestly, these tricks don't really help, not in any kind of permanent way. You can get a feeling or visualize it for a moment, but it never lasts.

Looking up at the stars, your friend disagrees. The one way I can always get infinity is looking at nature. We can always drive to beaches to count the stars. We can always swim in the ocean to feel small again. And since they're always there, I can always remember. So it's kind of like going home again.

It's the most natural thing in the world, and nothing makes me feel more free.

The Hero Appears

Make sure what you're doing is worth doing, then do it no matter what.

—BJ Barker

Philosophers such as Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, or Epictetus *lived* the same pattern of self-actualization that Aristotle described (where and why their philosophies diverged from Aristotle's general formula is a different story). They were philosophers not because of their thoughts but because of their action, their grace under enormous pressure. Socrates was an immigrant to Athens and an outcast, Epictetus was born a slave, and Marcus Aurelius, despite being the Emperor of Rome, had a short reign fraught with difficulty. Aurelius and his wife Faustina had thirteen children in their thirty-year marriage, only five of which lived beyond their father's untimely death. Crucially, Aurelius had the misfortune of only bearing one son: Commodus, as famously portrayed in the film *Gladiator*, became a vicious tyrant. Virtue, it seems, cannot be easily inherited. These philosophers were not considered great because they wrote books or spoke at length about theoretical matters. In fact, little of what any of these three wrote survives. This is the norm rather than the exception for philosophers in general. History remembers, rather, their lives.

The reputation we remember is not one of power but of virtue. Greatness only touches the virtuous. Only through virtue can someone make themselves great. Virtue is the only thing truly in our control. So adjust your conception of reputation accordingly – not to our modern standards, but to what your reason and your mind dictate. We remember their lives, as heroes

and great men and women. I believe the same is true today, and will always be true. Thus, we should strive not for intelligence or fame, for those are only the illusory secondary ends of the primary pursuit: greatness through virtue.

Examples of this fundamental process of self-actualization through simple virtue could fill several books.²¹⁴ But I will focus on just one to draw out Aristotle's peculiar conclusion: what happens when the hero finally appears.

Edson Arantes do Nascimento could not afford shoes. Yet his feet carried him to become not only the greatest soccer player, but the greatest athlete to ever live, a legend among other myths. He learned of his natural talent early, but rather than coast on it, he realized at once the same truths we are now working so hard to even begin to understand. He worked tirelessly, believing – not just knowing – that it would be a crime not to deprive himself of reaching his personal ideal. Pelé could not bear to let his life go un-lived, so he made it a reality. Think of all the unremarkable Pelé's who did not make this choice, who instead passed away their lives in obscurity.

At age fifteen he joined an adult club team, and began to quickly ascend. The air buzzed and cracked around him. At seventeen, he did not just reach the apex of the sport, he overshot it – scoring in and winning the World Cup final. For any player, even qualifying for the tournament would be a hallmark of the most elite achievements; winning was the ultimate goal, almost unimaginable. With his ascension nearly complete, his childhood soccer nickname became his true identity: Pelé.

Before he was eighteen, he had already surpassed the highest levels of achievement that the sport had to offer. But that was just the beginning. He would win a second World Cup, which was then a record. That record remain unbroken until Pelé broke it himself at age thirty with a third World

Cup win in 1970. With a feat that will never be broken, he passed from champion to legend. In that most decisive and formative of matches, a defender from the opposing Italian team, Tarcisio Burgnich, reached the same shocking conclusion regarding Pelé: "Before the match I told myself that Pelé was just flesh and bones like the rest of us. Later I realised I'd been wrong."²¹⁵

Stories like this make it clear that Pelé's impact was not just in terms of soccer or in his home country, but, rather, was a *global* fervor, perhaps even transcending what we think of as possible or believable. Consider these anecdotes

In Nigeria a two-day truce was declared in the tragic war with Biafra so that both sides could see him play. The Shah of Iran waited three hours at an international airport just to be able to speak with Pelé and be photographed with him. In Colombia when Pelé was sent from the game for arguing a referee's decision, the crowd stormed the field, the referee had to be rescued by the police, a linesman was hastily appointed referee, and Pelé was forced to come back in the game, a definite only-time event in the long history of international association football.²¹⁶

This is the stuff of Greek epic – it seems unreal. Yet Pelé is kind and modest. He speaks in such a commonplace manner that it almost seems banal, mundane, and cliché. On giving up a 'normal' childhood, Pelé says: "I was eager to help my family, and that gave me extra motivation to succeed and make my father proud of me. I was ready to give up things kids my age were normally doing. Instead, I spent a lot of time practicing and improving my skills."²¹⁷ That's it, there is no secret to his success. Pelé's virtues are effort, persistence, understanding, and a patience with himself, with what is outside of himself, and with others.

There is a lot of real wisdom in those sports clichés – e.g. 'practice makes perfect' – but removed from their context, they are meaningless. When a

poster in the classroom says that that ‘practice makes perfect’, you roll your eyes. But when Pelé says it, you pause. It means infinitely more, coming from someone who has done it. Which is why you should be careful about who you take your advice from.

These sports clichés used to mean something, in their original form. Today, they are diluted through reproduction and repurposing. But today, they mean nothing, and, thus, their simplicity is used against them, as if they were childish. The modern notion (and it is not a generational problem, for all generations have these problems, but, rather, a mindset we have willingly adopted) is one of borrowing from the successes of our parents and nations, as if they somehow define us, and not realizing that we have to give them back. As if, somehow, the circumstances of our birth matter at all to determining who we grow into. No, you do that yourself. The only successes you can claim are those that are yours. Just as we stole and destroyed these clichés from the people who spoke them, the generations that earned them, you want to base your own self-worth on what you can’t even control. I don’t know how else to say it – to strip down the thousands of lives led frustrated, searching for the answer. You already know the answer, but you don’t want that answer, you want another. You won’t accept what’s right in front of you. It’s simple, but, of course, never easy.

If you think otherwise, you aren’t taking enough responsibility for yourself. You may say I’m taking this too seriously; but have you considered that you’re not taking it nearly seriously enough? I have experienced both choices, and one option is far preferable to the other. I would rather lead a life fraught with difficult and under my own control than the most comfortable captivity. For while the latter is a deep pain that never fully heals, the former is what philosophers and prophets mean when they talk of true

freedom.

There is a sliver of doubt regarding Pelé, resulting mostly through the passage of time. Just as we doubt the greatness of Alexander because we can't visualize it; we doubt anything we cannot experience. Pelé is much like Alexander of Macedonia: being born into greatness merely inspired them to lead a life of legend. It was a matter of choice: their own choice. We say 'people back then must have been so stupid to believe that Alexander was half god, that Achilles was invulnerable except for his heel, that Pelé could not possibly be real'. But those people were not stupid; their feelings were as real as anything you can know now. Rather, those humorously illogical conclusions of gods and aliens follow easily from the *experience* of witnessing those great people in action. The doubt, the shame, the fear of your own wasted potential is manifest in the perception of their legend. People would rather believe in the supernatural than accept that they have wasted their life thus far. And thus, implicitly and tacitly, they will waste the rest of it. Legends such as Pelé and Alexander raise a different kind of doubt, not just the doubt that comes from the passage of time, but the kind of doubt that defies comprehension. We don't know anyone like this, so the concept is absurd to seriously consider.

So too with Pelé. Surely his natural talent played a role, as well as chance, luck, and the inevitable exaggeration of his reputation. Yet, all this would apply to anyone who is good at something. But he was not merely good; he was the greatest. His position is undeniable; it is a universal sentiment. So if even he says that there is no secret – just habitual effort in a concentrated area that you have a natural inclination toward – then, perhaps, you realize, there is no secret. Perhaps your hesitation, your unwillingness to get to work, is a reflection of your internal, almost shameful desires: that you wish it

wasn't up to you; that more was outside of your control; that the responsibility for your successes weigh too heavily on your back, until you can only crawl. If these shameful desires, these self-imposed limits, were to fade, then you would be forced to admit to yourself the way that things truly are. That you simply don't want to make your own life. You don't want to be in control, to be responsible. You want to go back to the days when things were simpler: a blissful ignorance; a summer vacation for the soul; a slow decay; withering and wasting away in ennui. You just don't want to accept this simple truth.

There are some views you can only see from the top. If you think the mountain looks tall from below, wait until you see the summit.

This kind of power is available to us all; it is available to you. There is only one path, and it's not hidden from anyone. But it is steep, and most would rather choose not to see it, to instead wander endlessly down the branches and forks in the road, only occasionally and briefly attempt the climb. The wonderful thing about this mountain is that it is not physical; there are no requirements or restrictions relevant to your body. It is entirely mental, and accessible to all. It is the universal experience of human flourishing, uniquely presented to you in your short life. At the top, people become higher than simply human. If greatness is only built upon virtue, then the stuff of legend is built on that. Aristotle argued that the more we flourished – fulfilling our purpose in life through virtue – the more we shared in the divine, the closer we became to godlike. In Greek mythology, the gods often took human form, had human emotions, physical limits and psychological flaws. But despite this, they were larger than life: in will, in ethic (both work and otherwise), in kindness, in vision, and in wisdom. To transcend the limits of our minds and bodies; to exceed what even you believed

you could ever achieve. To “love what you do. That passion will give you the strength, discipline, the desire to work hard and the humility to understand you can always improve. Soccer is a sport that you can’t win without the rest of your team. You cannot win a tournament without a good strategy, discipline and perseverance. Apply that in your life, and you will become a winner.”²¹⁸

This level of self-actualization is difficult to visualize if you haven’t played sports. But it applies to all realms of life, and not just competitive endeavors, “To achieve success, you need determination, hard work, respect for your mates and your adversaries, and, most of all, a love for what you’re doing. Not only in football, but for everything in life.”²¹⁹ There is something primal about focused effort. It is deeply satisfying to try, and whether you fail or succeed, you can rest your tired head at night with a sense of peace. I have felt it more while writing these pages than I ever have on the soccer field; a sense of digestion occurs as words pass out of your fingers and back into your eyes. It is the same digestion as reading; an ongoing process of understanding. Clarification through constant reiteration and rephrasing. Saying the same thing in countless ways mirrors hearing the same thing until you finally, actually learn it. And, of course, this mirrors the process of self-actualization. There is an ongoing, continual process – a constant filing and sanding and polishing of your rough edges – as you mold what you are now into who you will become. You are what you make yourself into. It would perhaps be more accurate to call this future self, this ideal yet unrealized, yourself. It comes from effort, which comes from making a choice, which comes from accepting what you see, which comes from seeing things clearly. You are, in the most fundamental sense, what your thoughts make you.

Pelé's immense personal achievement is repurposed for the world. "I believe God gave me a gift, and it is natural that I give my best in return to society. I want to be remembered for the example I set for people and the way I represented my country. I have a wonderful life, and I thank God for it." Inspiration is his gift to us, a shining example of a simple virtue: hard work and honesty to yourself. Don't borrow this from him, or claim his work as your own. Don't exaggerate or give Pelé what was never up to him. Rather, this inspiration is something you get to keep. Instead, claim your own for yourself, and for all of humanity, "I've been [true] to the same values since I was a kid. If we can teach kids from the very beginning the importance of discipline, determination, teamwork and ethics, among other things, we'll make a great contribution."²²⁰ That is the best way you can forge meaning out of the raw material of life, both yours and others.

Pele is a God. This may sound strange to you. But to those who saw him, these claims of otherworldliness were not hyperbole. Pelé was, simply, impossible. This is not something spiritual. You become godlike by fulfilling your function and purpose as a human. A human who is constantly and fully flourishing. If this seems extreme, know what Aristotle says about balance. Paradoxically, you often need to overcompensate in one direction to achieve balance.

The hero always appears, but the question is: will it be you, or someone else?

The Last Good Emperor

A goat herder has discovered a worn scrap of canvas in a cave near the Danube River in what is modern-day Austria. Improbably, it appears to be a lost entry from the travelling journal of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus. It is reprinted below in full. Historians claim that the fragment is authentic, especially given that Aurelius was on military campaign in the area near the end of his life in 175 AD. The personal nature of these writings and presence of ash suggest they were intentionally discarded,

It is common knowledge that Aurelius wrote these journals for himself, rarely intending anything for publication. It is not, however, known how many have been lost. Some academics argue that journal entries such as this are consistent with the kind of 'spiritual exercises' common to Stoic philosophy. They cite the format of the recovered text as evidence. First, Aurelius recounts the troubles of his life in chronological order, then he uses natural imagery and mental visualizations in the Stoic tradition to help himself come to terms with and be free from those troubles. As a historical note to the reader, the editor here wishes to echo the opinion of the late Roman historian Cassius Dio on Aurelius' achievements:

He did not meet with the good fortune that he deserved, for he was not strong in body and was involved in a multitude of troubles throughout practically his entire reign. But for my part, I admire him all the more for this very reason, that amid unusual and extraordinary difficulties he both survived himself and preserved the Empire. Just one thing prevented him from being completely happy, namely, that after rearing and educating his son in the best possible way he was vastly disappointed in him. This matter must be our next topic; for our history now descends from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust, as affairs did for the Romans of that day.

The will of one man held the greatest empire the world has ever known together. And without him, it soon crumbled.^{[221](#)}

There is a fire, ever-burning, inside all things. Or so the first Stoics argued. Now, I've come to realize, it doesn't matter whether life is made of fire or air or nothing, it is always the same. You can see this fire – this internal, vital spirit – wherever light pulls back the shade of night. Call it whatever you like, but it is undeniable.

When my father Antoninus Pius adopted me and my brother, he first spoke of duty. Duty to oneself, duty to one's family, and duty – above all – to the larger family of which white, shining Rome is but a house. Yet even on his deathbed weariness still filled his heart and mind. He spoke of nothing but our state and those foreign. How he toiled so that my children would not have to (and for that I have surely failed). Yet my father cannot not see my children anymore, and doubtful he would as he ignored those he had.

My brother grew frustrated at this coldness. But even then I saw that the fire which my father tended was far older and infinitely hotter. And though I often dreamt of my brother bearing this flame, leaving me to the simple life of the Greek cloak and bedroll, I already knew that he could never hold it. So, I breathed in my father's last breath and left tending the flame of not just Rome but of the civilized peoples of the earth entire. And this time, alone.

What the great poet says is true: just as leaves scatter on the grounds' surface, so are the children of men to nature's endless days.^{[222](#)}

Now I write this on campaign among the Quadi on the River Gran, as I have for years and years. It hardly matters that this life is not of my own design – for who among us has any say in the circumstances of our birth? – yet I will bear it happily, as nature bears the drought in trust of coming rain. Nature does not despair, or worry, and neither should you. To curse the parched earth is futile. But to continue to waste water and ignore the reality

of the drought is even more foolish. Much is outside of your control – nay, all – except, of course, your disposition. That is within your control. You can't help the drought, but you can choose your response.

Just as you could not help how tall you may be, or what country you were born into, or whether you have this or that eye color, so, too, can you hardly complain of the stomach ulcer chance has fated you with, the wars breaking out on the Eastern front of the Empire, or that you were born into the same role of Emperor as so many others have in this endless chain of human history. Bear all this with dignity; do not rebel against what is only natural.

Now I write to take stock of the events that have befallen the Empire. Not to bemoan them, as if they have somehow befallen *you* of all people. No, they are what anyone in your position would have to face. It's nothing personal, so don't make it personal. Nor, even, to call these events 'bad fortune' (to be fortunate at all, is a blessing). Rather, to recall these events before my mind's eye without prejudice, and to acknowledge the reality of the situation, both of which are requirements for just action.

Now ten years past, my brother Lucius – never much of a statesman – led the Roman legion East to campaign in Mesopotamia. Lucius was victorious, although the skill of one of our finest generals, Avidius Cassius, was certainly more responsible for his success. For the first time, Rome reached as far east as the rivers Tigris and Euphrates.

This was a great victory for Rome. Yet the troops' health began to falter and supplies dwindled, so the imperial army returned to the white city. Upon his return, Lucius took the title *Parthicus Maximus* for his oversight on the first Parthian campaign, despite never seeing battle. As he was my co-emperor, I was also expected to also take this title. I should not have been frus-

trated at my brother's vanity, but I was to no end. I would demur and reluctantly take the title later, if not only to end my painful deliberation.

This same general Cassius brought more than victory to Rome that year. The goddess Victoria welcomed him home with a position in the Roman Senate, a great honor. Victoria, it seems, is not without a sense of justice. Those troops in bad health turned out to carry the plague. Disease descended upon Rome so violently it is as if the city was struck by the poisoned arrows of Apollo himself. The disease killed thousands every day for years on end, millions in total. Our finest physicians of both body and spirit, Galen and the high priest of Egypt Harnouphis, were powerless to stop or slow it. I became weary facing these toils both on the wing and at home. I loathe superstition but even so I could not help feel as if it were retribution for Lucius' faults, or perhaps, even, my own. It was as if the world was diseased, its body out of order and violently trying to readjust itself, and Rome was the infected limb. I resolved to ease my conscience through impeccable action going forward. Nature would have to be convinced, and it would not be easy.

The next year Lucius led the imperial army East again. Cassius, now the lead-general, crossed this time past the Tigris and into Media Atropatene. Rome now stretched past the Black Sea and to the Caspian. For this, Cassius was again honored, and, claiming a divine lineage from the Syrian king, became governor of the new Roman state. After this campaign, Cassius remained to govern and Lucius was welcomed back to Rome, hailed yet again as *imperator*, and given the title *Medicus*. There he stayed with me, engaging once again the debauchery and unbecoming conduct he had grown accustomed to under the lazy eyes of foreign soil. But I always saw, and although I disapproved, I still loved him. Thus, despite our differences, I grieved deeply when my dear brother Lucius Verus fell ill and died in the year 169. I carried

his body through the white streets to the funeral pyre. As his ashes rose in the cold stale air, twisting like those of our father's before him, I declared my brother *Divus* – 'divine'. Now I was truly alone.

This was my turning point, when I finally shouldered the responsibility I had so long only half-heartedly embraced. For all the pain I endured, all the struggle I faced, all the philosophy I ignored was in preparation for this moment of my brother's death. He was dead, not me, so why was I still deathly afraid? I knew it was my duty to finish my brother's work – for him, for Rome – so I resolved at that moment to leave my fear behind. I left soon afterward and have since enjoyed victory and suffered grave defeat. I will live out the rest of my life in the desolate campgrounds and battlefields of this New Rome.

This was long ago, some six years. Now, this same general Cassius claims not just Syria but also Egypt as his own. It is true that my health has been poor as of late, but Cassius has prematurely claimed my death in an attempt to gain control of a part of Rome. He will never occupy all of it in this manner. Cassius does not realize is that the power of Rome is in the whole; occupying a part accomplishes little. Indeed, to occupy only a single part diminishes the unity, and therefore the power, of the entire Empire. But of course Cassius does not care about this, he is only trying to take what he can for himself. He is not thinking about what is best for Rome: to remain whole.

To be frank there is no human who does not hunger for power, and certainly no great general who does not hunger for the throne. Why else would he take such a dismal profession? Cassius just happens to be more cunning, and more driven than the others. For him, it is only natural. In a way, I wish it were someone other than a great friend who had betrayed me. But I know

it could not be any other way. I know this, even if it is hard for me to believe. But I must.

As my health improves I will travel to Egypt and reclaim the power so erroneously splintered for the unity of Rome. This is my resolve, this is the story that I now recount: so that I may have strength to hold together the ancient bonds that now threaten to break, so that I can hold the country together until my son Commodus is old and wise enough to continue a just rule, so that Rome does not descend into a bloodshed unseen since the times of Caesar. May the Gods, if they exist, give me the patience to endure these hardships that I cannot affect, the strength to do all that is within my power, and the wisdom to tell the difference.

But for now I wait, knowing full well the doubts that my wife must endure and the decisions she must make for our boy, our only living son of thirteen children. The future of Rome is in his hands – no, it is in my wife's, as she alone can raise Commodus well. I am forced to take my leave of my son's childhood in this godforsaken wasteland. I have said far too much already – I must certainly destroy these pages – but I dare not go into my personal troubles, at the very least for my own sake. I don't have the strength any more.

Here I have recounted my troubles – the woes of Rome. Now, I will engage in my daily practice to come to terms with them. With what little time I have left before sleep claims me, I will recall the images and the lessons they teach, so that I may press on. I have dwelled on the past, now let me refocus on the present:

Remember the tremendous mouth that opened up in the ground – a deep ravine filled with molten rock. It looked as if the earth has suffered a

great wound that now began to fester. Tall flames borne from the lava that flows beneath all of our feet were rendered visible here in this crack in the planet's crust. The lava was a light that never went out, not at night nor midday. A true door to hell below. The natives told me that the ground collapsed under them, revealing the crack some two generations ago. If my memory serves me, this fiery hole in the earth was in Parthyaëa, near old Alexandria: the once-great, now crumbling city of Merv. The long murals in the Eastern style shine softly with brilliant color. I've traveled the world and seen the jewels of each nation's craftsmen. Yet nature's structures outshine even the greatest of our own products. Even the most decadent, intricate tiled floors of blue and white – as vibrant and fluid as the edge of a cloud dissolving into the sky that surrounds it – is but an artifice of nature's artistry. It seems we can only borrow and imitate, but never replicate or surpass. Even the job of the statesman is impossible in comparison to the organization of the great herds, schools, and flocks of the grass, sea, and sky. Even our cities are but eddies in their currents. Swept even further from shore by nature's waves, which are of such a grand scale that we hardly notice our place in them, let alone comprehend them in full.

Although the door to hell in Parthyaëa – a lava flow peeking through a great crack in the crust – may have been the most sweat-inducing picture nature has presented me with, it was hardly the most remarkable. Just as this lava burns longer than any of our lives, so too did rumors of another eternal fire, a natural flame on top of a hill that cannot be extinguished. These oil fields of Baba Gurgur were only a few weeks march away in Iraq. They are the same fields that the Christians worship, its eternal fire supposedly the same as their God's. I do not care for their mythology, but its symbolism is invaluable to me. And so after stopping at the spectacular door to hell in

Parthyea, I eagerly sought out Baba Gurgur on our path eastward. The rumors were that

At long last when we finally arrived, Baba Gurgur was hardly even a bonfire. It was a measly hill of ash topped with a crater, within which wisps of flame flicked from glorified coals. Yet an old man who lived in a shack at the base of the hill told me that this fire has been burning not for years, or even decades, but for millennia. Some think it is as old as the earth itself, or older. The old man had been here all his life, eyes clouded with some natural ailment. (I wondered how he navigated, as the flames produced little heat. Perhaps he knew the contours of the hill well.) The old man told me that he had seen the small fire survive storms, blizzards, and earthquakes. Guard of the fire has passed through five different Empires, each spanning hundreds of years, and before which we there exists no history. I do not know if this old man's vision was so bad that he could not see the army, or he simply did not care. But surely he understood that this would soon be part of the Roman Empire, and other empires after that. I asked him why he guarded the fire if it was protected by the divine, and could not be extinguished even by blizzard. He replied that it is a great honor to guard the eternal flame, and that it provides the perfect opportunity to sit in thought and reflect upon the divine influence in nature. Of the necessity of his position, he said that it was not blizzards that troubled God, but men. Thus, he did too, and watched for them so that they would cause no harm upon the sacred flame.

After Baba Gurgur we marched long without much of anything. Every night, we set up camp. The men cook dinner, reread the same worn scraps of canvas held close to their chest for so many months, and talk about their wives back home. I retreat to the center of camp to meet with the generals

in my unnecessary large tent to reread the same worn map by dim torch-light. While the march taxes the body, these meetings tire the mind. There is a monotony to life on campaign, the endless succession of generations mirrored by innumerable footsteps. After being away from the white city of Rome for so many years, perhaps I feel the most fatigue in my soul.

Blue sulfur flows molten through volcanic rock. I set up camp again only to tear it down. Again and again.

For what is each day but a series of choices between the right way and the easy way? I feel this acutely. Each night I'm faced with the demons of those I've lost – friends, traitors, and heroes fallen. All are buried in the same dirt. My wife has borne me thirteen children and only five survive. I have but one son, and try as I might, he could not be more different from me. I fear for him, because of my failures as a father. I have felt every kind of loss. And I survive yet. I must.

The simple pleasure of existence – peace at every moment – is there if you look.

I must remember the arguments. To feel a loss is to delude yourself that you 'had' anything to begin with. That object you broke was loaned to you. The people you miss were just temporary fixtures passing through your life. They were never guaranteed. Even your youth, your health, your very life is a loan with an inevitable due date. You know that your heart has a planned obsolescence. So do your bones, and your brain. So why are you surprised? Because you are deluded.

Leaves scattered on the ground, Marcus. Your children spreading through this earth – long after your ashes scatter in the wind. Like your brother's, and our father's before him.

I rise in the morning and suspend these doubts. And after the trials of

the day are done, I retire again to this same tent. And every day, I make the same choice: to sit here and write these notes to myself, these meditations on virtue. It would be easier to go to sleep, and certainly more pleasurable. Sometimes I think of leaving this tent and engaging the men in their gossip. To turn off my mind and drift away. But these writings have been the only comfort I've known. Philosophy will always invigorate me. It has more than kept my spirits up, it has kept me alive.

Now we've reached the coast. We've followed its ragged edge for thirty days. Some nights I can see distant lights flashing silently, down and out in the distant sea. Like a great invisible city evacuated, yet its fires still burn. I set up camp again only to tear it down. Day after day.

We are headed east again, this time to resolve civic unrest. East is the direction of the lights. The soldiers grow uneasy as one night is brighter than the next. But it's growing colder, and that's enough to make anyone uneasy as well. Pay it no mind. These sights diverse and spectacular are but natural extensions of a deeper order. Its endless repetitions are bound to produce such varied forms. They are at once awesome and banal. I feel this same sense of weariness in everyday life. Dealing with the politics of the military. Organizing civic projects. Setting up camp only to tear it down. Over and over again and again. Life is always the same, so why am I continually surprised by it – when things go wrong? Simple – my expectations are off, and that should be easy enough to fix.

Remember your diplomatic visit to China long ago. The turtles the size of a small house. The immense weight of their Great Wall – how the Qin dynasty conquered to unite, and how they left the Wall to protect their great country. How the Qin fell to revolt (to their own Cassius) and how the Han

dynasty emerged from it even stronger. How the fall of the Qin was a necessary lesson, and how that great Empire still lives in the even greater Han. The Wall will never fall, so long as this civic energy is preserved. The warmth and composure even their soldiers express. The incomprehensible beauty of their culture, and not just because it is unfamiliar. The love for their people expressed in every brick of the city. The trees older than any city, yet so well protected that they've never seen the fires of war. The resolve you left with – don't you dare forget it. What you must now do to make sure that the Roman fire you inherited does not extinguish in your son's hands.

And, of course, the never ending lightning storm, burning hundreds of times a night. The same inner fire – this one happy and bright – burning inside of all things. The same fire that will burn this paper after it has fulfilled its task of internal change, a part of its flame forming into yours. The same fire that, through this act of writing, will forever be preserved inside of you. Take refuge here, just for a moment, then return refreshed.

Light a Fire

If you want success, figure out the price, then pay it.

—Scott Adams²²³

There is a big difference between wanting to do something and being able to. And there is an even bigger difference between being able to, and actually doing it.

Any fool knows this distinction. Yet how often do you hear ‘if only I were smarter, I’d enjoy school’? Or, ‘someday I’ll do x’. It’s so obvious – these talkers are the same people as those who are the most lazy, or unappreciative, or bitter. It’s not that they’re any less naturally talented – we all are dealt our own lot in that sense – but they squander it regardless. Surely, no one can deny they are talented in that regard: making excuses! In that, we can all be experts, perhaps even holding little competitions of who has it hardest, or who had the worst day, or who is struggling the most. We can all win that losing battle.

Why would you ever behave like they do? You should be ashamed to participate in their futile game. The best version of you would do so only if you had no other choice, or there were consequences of some kind.

But we always have a choice. Or do you love making excuses so much that you don’t even believe that most basic of truths?

In a way, you have no only one option. You have no other choice than to be the best you can be. That is, there’s only one true path for yourself to get there, and only you can see it.

An unfailing way to spot a liar is one who says ‘that’s good enough’. If

someone ever says that to you, you can be sure it's not true. Precisely the moment you hear that is when it could be better.

The only way you will ever know your limits is to find them yourself. That's something no one can ever teach you. Remember: any limit is either unknown or possible to overcome. For you, that's the same: within your power, and thus, your obligation to sprint through that limit as if it were made of smoke, already dissolving into the humid air.

This is it – there's nothing else to life other than this moment.

Remember what we established about death, that there is no difference between a long life and a short life. How little does the *duration* of life figure in at all when compared to the *quality* of the different ways of life. I'm not talking about becoming a doctor versus becoming an artist – no. In any profession, at any time, in any country: an enormous gulf separates a hero from someone ordinary.

The hero always appears: will it be you or someone else?

There is nothing inherent that allows these heroes to achieve what they set out to do. The gulf – the same one that's so vast you start sweating even thinking about it – is passable by anyone.

You or someone else? Your choice.

So, then, that's it.

What else is there to happiness? Nothing – beyond doing what you set out to do.

You can do whatever you want. You *get the wonderful opportunity* to choose what that is. Scott Adams, creator of the comic strip *Dilbert* said that anyone can have success at whatever price they choose. Simply pick a price, then pay it.

Want to be a cartoonist? It will cost you several years, but you can if you

want. In a way, the simple cost that accompanies all of life's activities determines who will do it. People have to choose what to pay their time and energy into, and there's only so much of it.

Want to be the very best cartoonist? That carries an enormous price, so strenuous that all but a few refuse to consider it. Yet for those few it is a price they will gladly pay. Those at the very top pay it happily – smiling down at those who balked at the price tag. Because they understand the value of being good. So why don't you?

You should be happy to do your chosen work every day.

That opportunity is enough to make anyone happy.

So why are you so unhappy? Do you honestly believe there's anything more to happiness? If so, then do that. But I don't think so.

—But you don't know what to do. You want to, but you don't know how to make yourself happy yet.

You already know what I'm going to say. Choose something, work at it night and day until you either rule it out as not for you, or determine that it's worthwhile. You may not be good at certain things, even if you enjoy them. That's nothing to get upset about.

There's so much that's outside of our control – even silly things like your height or your singing voice prevent you from doing certain things at a high level. But that shouldn't stop you from trying. If it does, then *that's* what you should be upset about.

Precisely because even your best laid plans will fail, you know this from experience. But we don't stop living. In spite of uncertainty we press on. And living means choosing even when you're uncertain. Especially when you're uncertain, one could say. So choose, and press on.

The above question was not rhetorical: What more is there than doing what you set out to do?

So stop dragging your feet.

It's your life, and you can change anything about it that you don't like.

Jon Krakauer writes:

So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservation, all of which may appear to give one peace of mind, but in reality nothing is more damaging to the adventurous spirit within a man than a secure future.²²⁴

You asked for this. You should jump out of bed in the morning to do your work. For the purpose, the shared part of humanity, of all our lives lies in what we do. As the Stoic Epictetus says, "Decide to be extraordinary and do what you need to do—now."

You finally convince yourself of this. You don't merely know its truth, or believe in its value – you feel it lodged in your brain like a bad habit. You have truly internalized it.

The familiar demon – your worst self – gasps for air. He's finally defeated.

You begin to walk away, already thinking of your new self and the places you will lead yourself.

To Be...

*What is it in ourselves that we should prize?
Not just transpiration (even plants do that).
Or respiration (even beasts and wild animals breathe).
Or being struck by passing thoughts.
Or jerked like a puppet by your own impulses.
Or moving in herds.
Or eating, and relieving yourself afterwards.
Then what is to be prized?*

An audience clapping? No. No more than the clacking of their tongues. Which is all that public praise amounts to – a clacking of tongues.

So we throw out other people's recognition. What's left for us to prize?

I think it's this: to do (and not do) what we were designed for. That's the goal of all trades, all arts, and what each of them aims at: that the thing they create should do what it was designed to do. The nurseryman who cares for the vines, the horse trainer, the dog breeder – this is what they aim at. And teaching and education – what else are they trying to accomplish?

So that's what we should prize. Hold on to that, and you won't be tempted to aim at anything else.

And if you can't stop prizing a lot of other things? Then you'll never be free – free, independent, imperturbable....Whereas to respect your own mind – to prize it – will leave you satisfied with your own self...

—Marcus Aurelius²²⁵

You drift for a long time, half asleep, hardly alive.

An infinite bookshelf unfolds to a vanishing point, then disappears.

It existed for only a moment; long enough so that you could see how much is there, but gone before you could learn anything real. But you know how much is out there, and how much of a shame it would be never to find

out more. Something is always better than nothing.

To be human is to look at ourselves and decide we want to change.

To be human is to strive.

To be human is to choose.

To be human is to ask what it is you want to be.

To be human is to perceive clearly.

To be human is to want to better yourself.

To be human is to believe you can do such.

To be human is to actually do as much.

To be human is the ability to define ourselves, and not to waste this ability.

To be human is to live together.

To be human is to live for others.

To be human is to better yourself so that you may better others.

To be human is to change our own nature, and that of universal nature, together.

To be human is the ability to reflect: on our actions, thoughts, and ourselves.

To be human is to recognize that we are so.

To be human is to be part of something bigger than yourself.

To be human is to be part of a universal city.

To be human is to feel the inner fire.

To be human is to digest.

To be human is to deeply understand – to grapple with them– not just know.

To be human is to be uncertain.

To be human is to know that you do not.

To be human is to act in spite of this.

To be human is to become a bee in a universal hive.

To be human is to truly be.

You wake up on a hill.

The infinite bookshelf of your mind has been replaced by a mountain in front of your eyes.

Maybe you'll climb it. That is *why*. That choice is unique: unique to the human species, unique to your life as an individual, unique to this situation, unique to this moment in time. This is all you are in entirety – nothing more.

Spring was finally coming, and you can begin to feel grass under your bare feet.

Things were beginning to thaw.

Conclusion: Choose

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

No one can take these things from you: if you perceive that they are yours, if you choose never to give them away, and if you act with them in mind.

That is a matter of your own choice.

Choice is your power.

Appendices

Appendix A: Letter to the Reader

Note: The following was an essay I wrote for class in May of 2015. It was the basis for this book and I've incorporated all of it. However, As I've purposefully published this book under lenient copyright, this letter becomes a perfect summary of the book as a whole. Although it stands alone and requires no previous knowledge, the letter includes all of the main techniques and metaphors that are to follow. I encourage you to share, print, teach it, or otherwise give it away, so long as you properly credit me and those who I reference.

To the troubled reader:

Every day you will be confronted with things outside of your control. Sickness, storms, theft, accidents - these are the facts of life. They are not good or bad, but simply are. These indifferent things cannot harm you. Rather, you harm yourself when you judge these accidental facts as detrimental. For whatever happens is a part of nature, and nothing that is natural is bad in itself - only when we make it so. And so things outside of your control are nothing to regret, or worry about, or fear. When you are faced with indifferent matters of chance such as these, tell yourself: 'I am freed from the burden of trying to control this.' How much more peaceful to be concerned only with those things which you can affect. Nature cannot be otherwise. If we are to be only a part of it, we must accept all that it confronts us with.

Through drawing this division in your mind, you can separate the wheat from the chaff and safely discard that which we cannot control. With practice, you can train yourself to recognize this more easily. Soon you will mold and temper your mind in such a way to accept the stresses and weights placed upon it. If you make disciplining your judgement a habit, you will flex where

previously you would have snapped. With practice, you can ride the waves of emotion that used to crash around you. To domesticate your emotions,¹ rather to be ruled by them - to stand up straight, not straightened - is to live in accordance with nature.² Only then can you respond properly to that which truly matters - matters of choice. Honest choice and just action are only possible with the clarity of a disciplined mind. So you must start at the beginning - by watching your thoughts and rejecting those judgments of indifferent things.

These are the teachings of the Stoic school. I hope that these writings find you in good fortune, and if you find the present difficult to bear, that I can lend you some of the relief that I have found in these old books. Some of our childhood friends have told me that you have adopted the Epicurean tradition of Sex, Drugs, and Rock 'n Roll.³ These pleasures are not in themselves bad. But through them one can develop vice. So it is my duty to warn you of the life of pleasure. Examine what this life looks like, where it leads, and how you will feel when it is over. And so I can only share my personal arguments against the Epicurean school, and hope that you receive them before you have fully adopted their doctrine.

The Stoic ethic stems directly from their worldview, one that is in sharp contradiction to the Epicurean. Allow me to draw the distinction through illustration. Remind yourself of the beautiful and diverse forms that nature takes. This is a pleasure in itself. The thousands of different birds, with their hollow bones and colorful feathers, are not unlike the variety of people and situations that you will be faced with every day. Life appears random because we are too small to see the whole picture. But there is a deep order to all things, and this order is sometimes revealed for a moment in the beauty of nature. It is from this order that a sense of duty stems, and from that duty

nature reminds us that pleasures should be tempered. Nature reveals our nature, and through it, the way to happiness.

Consider bees. Their wings are laughably small, so much so that their flight was argued to be impossible. But the wings of bees are finely tuned to the size of their large, fuzzy bodies so as to maximize the amount of pollen they can carry. Bees waste nothing: they use this pollen to make honey - pure energy - and spend this time and energy to build a hive for future generations. Bees intuitively use what we must use math to prove: that hexagons are a fantastic shape for building. A grid of tessellated hexagons maximizes the perimeter surface area per unit volume better than any other shape. Each cell of the honeycomb has entry and exit points. And this fantastically complex and astonishingly regular honeycomb was built simultaneously, with bees starting at different corners and in the middle, meeting and converging at the borders. Bees can fill a sheet of any size with no gaps. A hive of bees may as well be one organism. (It certainly evolves as one.) And a hive functions perfectly with its environment, too. Bees grow and evolve with the flowers, predicting each other's changes to the benefit of the whole natural world.

This sense of wonder found in nature is not idle chatter. You must recognize your common identity and strive to live up to the orderly ideal of nature. Strive to be like a bee, which never fails to fulfill its function.⁴ Function as a human in the fullest sense - not as mere animal, or individual, or even father, but as a member of the greatest family to grace the universe: nature. In your dealings with others, build a honeycomb. Think and act correctly even when you are separated from others. In doing so, all of humanity will harmonize with each other and in accord with the universal order of nature. To do otherwise - to lie, to act unjustly, and to be misled by false perceptions - is to act against nature and betray the beauty all natural beings

hold inside of themselves.

For the sense of beauty that we find in the sand and the surf and the stars is not something exterior to us humans. Nature is not a beautiful object - it is beautiful because we are part of its order.⁵ And so the concept of symmetry appeals to us innately as a reflection of the universal order of nature. Yet I'll be the first to tell you that asymmetry can be as beautiful as the most regular snowflake. The splaying of a field of corn, the blotches of a cow, the cracks on a loaf of bread, a chipped tooth, a beauty mark, or strand of hair that escapes again and again from its position behind the ear - these are the hauntingly beautiful visions of life.⁶ Their appeal is found not in order but disorder. Asymmetry reminds us of life's incredible fragility. For just as ripe fruit tastes the sweetest just before it spoils, life is all the sweeter with the knowledge that it is short. Symmetrical forms in the natural world show us that life is resilient; a species persists beyond any individual. This is why all living things reproduce - a kind of immortality - creating new life in their image and striving to persist in the world. Life is an order grafted onto the world that can stand up against the erosion of entropy. But inevitably things wear down and fall apart. And asymmetry gently reminds us of this fact - not in a distressing way, but like a friend who allows you to appreciate all the good that still remains. This gives youth a vibrant energy - a whole life yet to be lived - and old age a wizened, graceful sense of the shortness of life.

Children are beautiful in their youthful energy and flawed asymmetries. They are like bread. You can prepare all you want, to attempt to form them, but just as the cracks in the crust are unknowable before baking, children have a delightful quality of novelty. It is the unknowability and irregularity that gives the cracking crust its beauty. These things resemble life in the fullest sense. They are truly present, living and reacting to whatever happens.

Be a child for as far as you can go. Children are made by us, yes, but their particular aspects - their freckles, personalities, sound of their laughs, their virtues, vices, and futures - are outside of our control. That lack of control, that unpredictability, is where beauty can be found. It belongs to nature: to an order that is unseen, an order that has the appearance of randomness, but an order all the same.

Like all that is good and natural, bees are not an impossibility but, rather, the upper limit of an animal's shape, the logical conclusion of a specific purpose being filled in the natural world. Nature demands of the bees that they fulfill their function. And so too, nature demands that we fulfill ours. What is our function? To live in accordance to nature. Aristotle remarked that plants can eat and reproduce, and animals can see and feel. Pleasure belongs in this area of life. As humans we inhabit the pleasures of food and sex from time to time, but to rest there indefinitely is to betray our human nature for an animal one. No, I choose to transcend my animal nature for something higher. For we are animals gifted with a rational mind, itself a chance at serenity, wisdom, and happiness. Happiness comes first with the mastery of judgement, then of assent to nature, then in just action. To fail to achieve this internal mastery is to betray the trust that nature has placed in us by virtue of each of our astonishing lives.

The Epicureans claim that there is no order to nature. For them, the universe is random atoms, flailing about like the bodies of newborn calves. Let us suppose for the sake of argument, that this is true. Even if it were so, the answer to life's question is the same: suspend judgement to domesticate your emotions, assent only to that which is within your control, and act justly in the face of anything. These principles lead to happiness, even in the face of complete randomness. To ignore them entirely is to behave lower than an

animal, which at least knows what is good for itself, unlike the fool who is angered by the falling of rain or the beating of the sun, as if they were unnatural. No, as Aurelius often said, providence or atoms - virtue is still up to you.⁷

And we must engage life with a full stride, for death is nipping at our heels. The fragility of life, the shadow of death, hangs over your every action. There is no time to lose, and this makes virtue all the rarer. I will share an exercise that allows one to cultivate this sense of urgency. Imagine the moment you realize that you will die. Not now, but visualize yourself on your deathbed with hours to live. What emotions will you feel? Fear, maybe. Regret, maybe. Satisfaction, almost certainly not. What kind of person would feel satisfaction at the moment of death if they feel life has been unfairly revoked, and too early at that? The trick is in the realization that life is no one's lot, not by right. To live, to breathe, to read these very words on the page is an extraordinary fact of the universe. Most of it is and will always be lifeless. Even to think the thoughts you are now thinking is a rarity beyond comprehension. And that rarity means that the ability to think is constantly at risk of loss.⁸ So when the moment of death is upon you, say not 'why me' or 'why so soon' but: 'how amazing I was here at all' and 'I am thinking now, so I have more to do'.

What will the moment of death feel like? The smell of old flesh mixing with the incontinence and cleaning chemicals of a hospital bed. The engine of your body running hot - straining, gears grinding without oil, and finally melting. This is the moment when the delicate machinery of your body can no longer hold off the slow, inevitable decay that all living things must accept. This is when your billions of tiny bees working in concert cannot keep your body stitched together any longer. You will die surrounded by loved

ones or truly alone - it is hard to say which is more preferable, to lose or to be lost - and when you die you will either dissolve into atoms or be released into the universal order that you were born into. In either case, it is nothing to fear. Only fear choosing to live a bad life.⁹ Bodily pleasures will fade even quicker than your memory of these words. So write words of your own and inscribe them on your heart, as here I have humbly attempted to do.

Your friend, both in life and living well,

Zachary G. Augustine

Notes for Appendix A

1 "Stoicism is about the domestication of emotions, not their elimination." — Nassim Nicholas Taleb

2 "To stand up straight – not straightened."

3 Epicurus, *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia*, trans. Brad Inwood and Lloyd P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

4 "At dawn, when you have trouble getting out of bed, tell yourself: 'I have to go to work – as a human being. What do I have to complain of, if I'm going to do what I was born for – the things I was brought into the world to do? Or is this what I was created for? To huddle under the blankets and stay warm?' (But it's nicer here...*) So you were made to feel 'nice'? Instead of doing things and experiencing them? Don't you see the plants, the birds, the ants and spiders and bees going about their individual tasks, putting the world in order, as best they can? And you're not willing to do your job as a human being? Why aren't you running to do what your nature demands?" Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Hays, Modern Library ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2002), V.I. *In his personal writings, Aurelius often interjects his claims with objections, which I have indicated in parentheses. Aurelius forms a dialogue with himself. Confronting his excuses allows him to reject them. This is a method of positive self-talk, although it can appear negative at times.

5 Alan P. Lightman, *The Accidental Universe: The World You Thought You Knew*, 2014, 83.

6 "even the by-products of natural processes have a certain charm and attractiveness. Bread, for instance, in the course of its baking, tends to crack open here and there, and yet these very cracks, which are, in a sense, offences against the baker's art, somehow appeal to us and, in a curious way, promote our appetite for

the food....the fact that they follow from natural processes gives them an added beauty and makes them attractive to us.” Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, III.2.

7 Ibid., IV.3 and X.6.

8 “So we need to hurry. Not just because we move daily closer to death but also because our understanding – our grasp of the world – may be gone before we get there.” Ibid., III.1.

9 “There’s no reason in being alive if you’re not happy. Don’t be one of those people that walks around miserable, hating their life. You can change anything about your life that you don’t like.” Anthony Green, Anthony Green speech - Circa Survive Live @ Transfer Union 8/25/12, August 25, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhMxJJNLOY>.

Appendix B: Timeline of Practical Philosophy

Most dates are approximate. Timeline is not comprehensive.

Name	Life	School	Extant philosophical works
Marcus Aurelius	121-180 AD	Stoic. Heavily influenced by Epictetus.	Primarily the Meditations, which were journal entries published posthumously, and some letters survive. Little lost (as far as we know; this goes for this entire list).
Plutarch	46-120 AD	Platonist*	Many writings, primarily the biographies Lives and essays on Morals (Moralia) survive. Some lost.
Epictetus	55-135 AD	Stoic. Student of Musonius Rufus.	Arrian, Epictetus' student, wrote comprehensive lecture notes published in the Discourses and Handbook (Enchiridion).
Musonius Rufus	25-101 AD	Stoic	Wrote nothing himself, but students created lecture notes, much of which have been lost.
Christ	0-30 AD	Christianity (Founder)	Wrote nothing himself, but portrayed in The Bible.
Seneca	4 BC-65 AD	Stoic	Many essays, hundreds of letters, several plays survive.
Lucretius	98-55 BC	Epicurean	Epic poem On the Nature of Things (De rerum natura) survives mostly complete.
Cicero	106-43 BC	Platonist*	Many speeches, letters, and books on politics and rhetoric.
Chrysippus	279-206 BC	Stoic. Student of Cleantes.	Only fragments survive through other authors. Despite what little we have, his writing output was prolific.

Cleanthes	330-230 BC	Stoic. Student of Zeno.	Only fragments survive through other authors.
Zeno of Citium	334-262 BC	Stoic (Founder)	Only fragments survive through other authors.
Epicurus	341-271 BC	Epicurean (Founder)	Only a few fragments and letters out of hundreds of written works remain. Much lost.
Pyrrho	360-270 BC	Skeptic (Founder)	Wrote nothing himself.
Aristotle	384-322 BC	Aristotelian (Founder). Student of Plato.	Mostly lecture notes not intended for publication, some fragments in other authors. Much lost.
Plato	427-347 BC	Platonist (Founder). Student of Socrates.	Many dialogues survive. Some lost.
Socrates	469-399 BC	No affiliation	Wrote nothing himself. Portrayed in the works of Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes, where he was likely fictionalized.

*Both Plutarch and Cicero practiced different and strange forms of Platonism, which changed much and later evolved into a different school, Neoplatonism.

Appendix C: English Translations of the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius

I am indebted to the passionate and warm community of philosophers at [reddit.com/r/Stoicism](https://www.reddit.com/r/Stoicism) for compiling most of the following resource. I encourage you to visit their Frequently Asked Questions for links to the full texts, freely downloadable for those in the public domain (pre-1923) and publication information for those books in copyright. ²²⁶

- Gill (2013) (first 6 books only)
- Tuffley (2012) (first 5 books only)
- Hard (2011)
- McNeil (2011) (selections, modernization of Long, reorganized)
- Hadot (2010) (selections in other works, translated from the French by Chase)
- Needleman and Piazza (2008) (selections only)
- Hammond (2006)
- Hays (2002)
- Hicks and Hicks (2002)
- Forstater (2000) (selections, modernization of Long translation, re-organized)
- Kaufman (1997) (revision of Long)
- Grube (1983)
- Staniforth (1964)
- Komai (1952) (selections only, in verse)
- Farquharson (1946)
- Blake (1920) (selections only, in verse)
- Jennings (1917) (selections only)
- Haines (1916)
- Crump (1907) (selections, reorganized)
- Jackson (1906)
- Chrystal (1902) (revision of Hutcheson and Moor)
- Wilson (1902) (selections only)
- Swasey (1900) (selections only)
- Smith (1899) (selections only)
- Rendall (1892)
- Zimmern (1887) (revision of Collier)

Crossley (1882) (book 4 only)

Tileston (1876) (selections only)

Long (1862)

McCormac (1844)

Graves (1792)

Thomson (1747) (selections only)

Hutcheson & Moor (1742)

Collier (1701)

Casaubon (1634)

Bouchier (1534) (from an unknown French translation)

Appendix D: Videos

- Bruce Lee. Be Water My Friend. Accessed September 25, 2015.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqHSbMR_udo.
- CSLewisDoodle. On Living in An Atomic Age by C.S. Lewis Doodle, 2013.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxFmkg5dcyk>.
- Feynman, Richard P. Beauty. Digital video. The Feynman Series, 2011.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRmbwczTC6E>.
- . Confusion. Digital video, 1963.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lytxafTXg6c>.
- . Curiosity. Digital video. The Feynman Series, 2011.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmTmGLzPVyM>.
- . Honours. The Feynman Series, 2011.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkvoKCR3Yiw>.
- . Ode to a Flower. Cub Studio. Accessed July 22, 2015.
<https://vimeo.com/55874553>.
- Jobs, Steve. Computers Are like a Bicycle for Our Minds. Memory & Imagination: New Pathways to the Library of Congress, 1990.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ob_GX5oZa6c.
- Ma, Jack. Jack Ma at the Davos World Economic Forum. Interview by Charlie Rose, January 23, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kzGKVLslEo>.
- Sagan, Carl. We Are Here: The Pale Blue Dot, n.d.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pfwY2TNehw>.
- Wallace, David Foster. This Is Water. Kenyon College, Ohio, 2013.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CrOL-ydFMI>.

Appendix E: Further Reading

- Adams, Scott. *How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big: Kind of the Story of My Life*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2013.
- Adler, Mortimer J., and Charles L. Van Doren. *How to Read a Book*. Rev. and updated ed. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972.
- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2014.
- Aurelius, Marcus. *Meditations*. Translated by Gregory Hays. Modern Library ed. New York: Modern Library, 2002.
- Franklin, Benjamin. *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964.
- Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Edited by Arnold I. Davidson. Translated by Michael Chase and Pierre Hadot. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.
- . *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*. Translated by Michael Chase. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. Delta trade pbk. reissue. New York, N.Y.: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2005.
- Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. Edited by Elizabeth Rapaport. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978.
- Mingyur, Yongey, Eric Swanson, and Daniel Goleman. *The Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secret and Science of Happiness*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Plato. “Apology.” Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Accessed September 23, 2015. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html>.
- Stedall, Alan. *Marcus Aurelius: The Dialogues*. London: Shephard-Walwyn Publishers, 2005.
- Stockdale, James B. *Courage under Fire: Testing Epictetus’s Doctrines in a Laboratory of Human Behavior*. Vol. no. 6. Hoover Essays ; Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution, Stanford University, 1993.

Notes

Part I: Life

¹ “I see now that the circumstances of one’s birth are irrelevant. It is what you do with the gift of life that determines who you are.” — Mewtwo, Kunihiro Yuyama and Michael Haigney, *Pokémon: The First Movie - Mewtwo Strikes Back*, Animation, (1998), http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0190641/?ref_=fn_al_tt_2. The idea of considering what is inside and outside of your control and ignoring the latter is most clearly felt in the writings of the Stoic philosophers: Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, Epictetus, Chrysippus, Cleanthes, and Zeno of Citium.

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2014), III.1109.a34.

³ An excellent phrase graciously appropriated from Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, 1. ed, The New York Times Bestseller (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1997).

⁴ Epicurus, *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia*, trans. Brad Inwood and Lloyd P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

⁵ So said Socrates in Plato, “Apology,” in *Five Dialogues*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, 2nd ed (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002).

⁶ See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase and Pierre Hadot (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002); Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁷ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Jeremy Collier, 1701, III.9.

⁸ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Hays, Modern Library ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2002), IV.3.

⁹ This is no quote I’m aware of, but I would not be surprised if it exists in some Stoic text. I may have read it and forgotten where, which can be said about many of the maxims written here.

¹⁰ See: Jean-Paul Sartre. Thanks Bart Van Wassenhove for making this connection explicit.

¹¹ “Stoicism is about the *domestication* of emotions, not their elimination.” — Nassim Nicholas Taleb and “To stand up straight – not straightened.” Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, III.5.

¹² “But it is not complicated. It is just a lot of it. And if you start at the beginning, which nobody wants to do – I mean, you come in to me now for an interview, and you ask me about the latest discoveries that are made. Nobody ever asks about a simple, ordinary phenomenon in the street. What about those colors? We could have a nice interview, and I could explain all about the colors, butterfly

wings, the whole big deal. But you don't care about that. You want the big final result, and it is going to be complicated because I am at the end of 400 years of a very effective method of finding things out about the world." Richard P. Feynman, Take the world from another point of view, Television, 1973, quoted in Richard P. Feynman, *Curiosity*, Digital video, The Feynman Series, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mTmGLzPVyM>.

¹³ These are the teachings of the Stoic school, particularly the primary sources of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. The style of argumentation with your personal demons is a mixture of Aurelius' *Meditations* and Socrates in Plato's dialogues. The deconstruction of Stoic doctrine into three fundamental activities – disciplines of judgment, assent, and action – can be found in Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, and the relevant sections on Stoicism in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. I have attempted to mirror this theoretical structure throughout this book, drawing on Alan Stedall, *Marcus Aurelius: The Dialogues* (London: Shephard-Walwyn Publishers, 2005), and Steven Pressfield, *The War of Art: Break through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles* (New York: Black Irish Entertainment LLC, 2002) for inspiration in terms of style.

¹⁴ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, IV.49.

¹⁵ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, Delta trade pbk. reissue (New York, N.Y.: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2005), 286.

¹⁶ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VIII.48.

¹⁷ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, ed. Robert B. Pippin, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Michael Tooley, "The Problem of Evil," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2015, 2015, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/evil/>.

¹⁹ Stedall, *Marcus Aurelius*, 30–31:

'For instance, Rufus, do you consider the gods as benevolent or malicious?'

'Why, if entreated appropriately, with due ritual and respect, benevolent of course.'

I did not understand where this was leading. He nodded at my answer, the glint still in his eye.

'Yes, benevolent – of course,' he repeated, nodding. 'And would you say they are all-powerful?'

'Yes, my Lord, for that is what makes them gods.'

'And all-knowing?' Marcus watched me intently.

'Yes, being all-powerful, they must be all-knowing.'

Marcus paused for a moment, then continued, 'But would you say, Rufus, that there is a great evil in the world?'

'At certain times and places, it is true, there *is* such evil.'

'And does it fall upon the innocent as well as the guilty?'

'Yes, being innocent of sin it seems is no protection against evil.'

Marcus smiley amiably. 'If there is such evil, and it falls upon good and bad alike, how can it be that the gods are benevolent?'

He had me trapped with his logic, but it was not a political trap. I realized it was a trap of the dialectic, beloved of Greek philosophers, and smiled in acknowledgment of the cunning of his approach. He smiled back, openly, in return.

'There you have me, Lord. But are you saying that the gods are not benevolent?'

Marcus hesitated. 'Well, Rufus, there can only be a limited number of logical interpretations of the existence of evil in the world, can't there?'

²⁰ For an excellent and comprehensive, if academic, history of the word see: Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

²¹ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VIII.29.

²² Ibid., VIII.51, VII.59.

²³ La Dispute, *Somewhere At The Bottom Of The River Between Vega And Altair*, Audio CD (No Sleep Records, 2008).

²⁴ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, IV.1.

²⁵ Ibid., VII.17a.

²⁶ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Epistles*, trans. Richard M. Gummere, vol. 75–77, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), sec. XCIV, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Moral_letters_to_Lucilius. Equivalent to *Letters from a Stoic* or *Moral Letters to Lucilius* letter 94 (=XCIV).

²⁷ A humorous and insightful book on failure is Scott Adams, *How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big: Kind of the Story of My Life* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2013).

²⁸ Aldous Huxley, "Foreword," in *Brave New World*, 1st Perennial Classics ed. (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), vii.

²⁹ Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 75–77.

³⁰ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VIII.51.

³¹ Ibid., IV.3.

³² Seneca, *Epistles*, vol. 75–77, pt. XCIV.29–30.

³³ Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 174a.

³⁴ Often attributed to Aristotle. Perhaps *Metaphysics* XII.1072b.25.

³⁵ Feynman, Take the world from another point of view. quoted in Feynman, *Curiosity*.

³⁶ Steve Jobs, *Computers Are like a Bicycle for Our Minds*, Memory & Imagination: New Pathways to the Library of Congress, 1990, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ob_GX5oZa6c.

³⁷ Arnold I. Davidson, "Introduction," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, by Pierre Hadot (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 35.

³⁸ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, III.2.

³⁹ In contrast to the sunflower, which does not have an increasingly intense method of fill, but only a pattern of continuous growth, leading to a simple, dense

spiral. In fact, selection pressure works against random patterns such as cracks or other sprawling patterns because weight is at such a premium in the plant's head.

⁴⁰ Ibid., V.8.

⁴¹ "At dawn, when you have trouble getting out of bed, tell yourself: 'I have to go to work – as a human being. What do I have to complain of, if I'm going to do what I was born for – the things I was brought into the world to do? Or is *this* what I was created for? To huddle under the blankets and stay warm?' (But it's nicer here...*) So you were made to feel 'nice'? Instead of doing things and experiencing them? Don't you see the plants, the birds, the ants and spiders and bees going about their individual tasks, putting the world in order, as best they can? And you're not willing to do your job as a human being? Why aren't you running to do what your nature demands?" Ibid., V.1. *In his personal writings, Aurelius often interjects his claims with objections, which I have indicated in parentheses. Aurelius forms a dialogue with himself. Confronting his excuses allows him to reject them. This is a method of positive self-talk, although it can appear negative at times.

⁴² Alan P. Lightman, *The Accidental Universe: The World You Thought You Knew*, 2014, 83.

⁴³ "even the by-products of natural processes have a certain charm and attractiveness. Bread, for instance, in the course of its baking, tends to crack open here and there, and yet these very cracks, which are, in a sense, offences against the baker's art, somehow appeal to us and, in a curious way, promote our appetite for the food....the fact that they follow from natural processes gives them an added beauty and makes them attractive to us." Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, III.2.

⁴⁴ Ibid., IV.27.

⁴⁵ Ibid., IV.3 and X.6.

⁴⁶ "A Smooth Sea Never Made a Skillful Sailor," *Lifehacker*, accessed August 26, 2015, <http://lifehacker.com/a-smooth-sea-never-made-a-skillful-sailor-514449168>.

⁴⁷ "People say to me 'Are you looking for the ultimate laws of physics?' No I'm not, I'm just looking to find out more about the world, and if it turns out there is a simple ultimate law that explains everything, so be it. That would be very nice to discover. If it turns out it's like an onion with millions of layers, and we're just sick of looking at the layers, then that's the way it is. But whatever way it comes out, nature is there and she's going to come out the way she is. Therefore, when we go to investigate it, we shouldn't pre-decide what it is we're trying to do except to find out more about it." Feynman, *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*. quoted in Feynman, *Beauty*.

⁴⁸ *The Legend of Korra*, bk. 4 episode 2: Korra Alone.

⁴⁹ Aristotle, "Metaphysics," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, 2001 Modern Library Pbk. ed., The Modern Library Classics (New York: Modern Library, 2001), VIII.1045a8–10.

⁵⁰ Albert Einstein, "The Delusion," *Letters of Note*, February 12, 1950, <http://www.lettersofnote.com/2011/11/delusion.html>. as quoted in Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 165. Kabat-Zinn or his source seems to have paraphrased the original letter. Although the quote is not precisely what Einstein seems to have

written, I find the additions to be illustrative and excellent.

⁵¹ Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 166.

⁵² Viktor E Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962).

⁵³ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VI.38.

⁵⁴ Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 166.

⁵⁵ Bruce Lee, Be Water My Friend, accessed September 25, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqHSbMR_udo.

⁵⁶ Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Dell, 1971), 450.

⁵⁷ This volume, 'Fundamentals'.

⁵⁸ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VI.36a.

⁵⁹ Ibid., IX.13.

⁶⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

⁶¹ "There is evidence within the CBT literature that a preponderance of verbal processing in the form of rumination is associated with a range of psychological symptoms, overgeneral memory, and poor problem solving (e.g. Watkins, 2008). Conversely, the ability to flexibly integrate verbal and sensor/perceptual information may be the hallmark of more adaptive processing." Richard. Stott, *Oxford Guide to Metaphors in CBT: Building Cognitive Bridges*, Oxford Guides in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 19.

⁶² Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 287.

⁶³ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

⁶⁴ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, IV.32.

⁶⁵ A theme repeated often in the excellent Richard Carlson, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff – and It's All Small Stuff: Simple Ways to Keep the Little Things from Taking over Your Life*, 1st ed. (New York: Hyperion, 1997).

⁶⁶ Darren Aronofsky, *Pi*, Drama, Thriller, (1998).

⁶⁷ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VIII.36.

⁶⁸ *The Legend of Korra*, Animation, Action, Adventure, (2012), bk. 2 Episode 10: A New Spiritual Age.

⁶⁹ Steven Soderbergh, *Side Effects*, Crime, (2013), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2053463/>. This movie may be disturbing for those with mental health illnesses, but this phrase taken alone sticks with me as an accurate depiction of depression.

⁷⁰ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VIII.49.

⁷¹ *The Legend of Korra*, bk. 4 episode 2: Korra Alone.

⁷² Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VII.64.

⁷³ Ibid., VII.18.

⁷⁴ Ibid., VII.33.

⁷⁵ Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, 1st Scribner classics ed. (New York: Scribner Classics, 1997).

⁷⁶ Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*.

⁷⁷ Seven attitudes of mindfulness from Ibid., 33–40. The descriptions and examples are my own. Special thanks to Ginger Carr and Beth Jago for sharing this list

with me so long ago.

⁷⁸ “The universe is change, our life is what our thoughts make it.” Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, IV.3.

⁷⁹ Ibid., V.16.

⁸⁰ All Get Out, *The Season*, Audio CD (Favorite Gentlemen, 2011).

⁸¹ Massimo Pigliucci, “How to Be a Stoic,” *The New York Times*, February 2, 2015, sec. The Stone, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/02/how-to-be-a-stoic/>.

⁸² I am again indebted to the work of the late Pierre Hadot for this most essential of insights. For a refresher see Hadot, *The Inner Citadel* and this volume, ‘Fundamentals’.

⁸³ See above note.

⁸⁴ 400BC +/- 150 years for both Stoicism, Buddhism, and Epicureanism. Massimo Pigliucci, “Buddhism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism,” *Rationally Speaking*, February 1, 2013, <http://rationallyspeaking.blogspot.com/2013/02/buddhism-epicureanism-and-stoicism.html>.

⁸⁵ Such research likely exists but I am not yet well-versed in history. A pointer in the right direction would be greatly appreciated.

Part II: Liberty

⁸⁶ Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski, *The Matrix*, Action, Sci-Fi, (1999).

⁸⁷ “You can discard most of the junk that clutters your mind – things that exist only there – and clear out space for yourself...by comprehending the scale of the world...by contemplating infinite time...by thinking of the speed with which things change – each part of everything; the narrow space between our birth and our death; the infinite time before; the equally unbounded time that follows.” Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, IX.32.

⁸⁸ cf. Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004) and Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* on the impact of education on personal moral virtue, and the degree to which external factors such as government or society are responsibility for cultivating this sense. Also contrast with the Stoic view that virtue is almost entirely internal in origin, e.g. in Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002.

⁸⁹ David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water* (Kenyon College, Ohio, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CrOL-ydFMI>; David Foster Wallace, “Transcription of the 2005 Kenyon Commencement Address” (Kenyon College, Ohio, May 21, 2005), http://web.archive.org/web/20080213082423/http://www.marginalia.org/dfw_kenyon_commencement.html.

⁹⁰ Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix*.

⁹¹ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VI.57.

⁹² The popularized translation of *Meditations* IV.3 is quoted, because it beauti-

fully illustrates that your thoughts quite literally define your life. Hays writes instead, “The world is nothing but change. Our life is only perception,” while Long writes “The universe is transformation: life is opinion.” Farquharson and Hard offer two independent translations nearly identical to Long, substituting ‘transformation’ for ‘change’, with Hard’s additional qualification ‘mere opinion’.

⁹³ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, “On Asthma and Death (Letter 54),” in *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, ed. Phillip Lopate, trans. Robin Campbell, 1st Anchor Books Pbk. Ed edition (New York: Anchor, 1995).

⁹⁴ See this volume, ‘Patterns in Nature’.

⁹⁵ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, III.16.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, V.26.

⁹⁷ “Nowhere you can go is more peaceful – more free of interruptions – than your own soul. Especially if you have other things to rely on. An instant’s recollection and there it is: complete tranquility. And by tranquility I mean a kind of harmony.” *Ibid.*, IV.3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, II.2.

⁹⁹ Feynman, Take the world from another point of view.

¹⁰⁰ Full text available online for free: Plato, “Apology,” trans. Benjamin Jowett, accessed September 23, 2015, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html>.

¹⁰¹ Unsolved (or unsatisfactorily solved) problems yet remain, chief among them: the sources of natural variability; the inheritance of learned behaviors; the units of selection (especially individual vs family vs kin); the evolution of language, and of mind; problems surrounding emotion and altruistic behavior; the swamping problem; the presence and continued success of maladaptations; convergent evolution and teleology; the existence of sterile members of social animals; and the definition of a species. I hope to write about these problems.

¹⁰² “The Civil War is one of those things that when you’re first told about it, you’re given a very simplified explanation: ‘It was the war to free the slaves!’ Then you grow older and start to experience and hear more, it starts to feel very complicated: ‘States Rights! War of Aggression! Lincoln was a racist too!’ But then after study, reading and contemplation, it somehow becomes simple again: It really was about slavery.” Ryan Holiday, “Why You Need to Understand the American Civil War,” *Thought Catalog*, April 17, 2014, <http://thoughtcatalog.com/ryan-holiday/2014/04/319406/>.

¹⁰³ This process occurs with deceptively simple concepts like Adam Smith’s description of capitalism in *The Wealth of Nations* and its influence (implicit or otherwise) on Charles Darwin’s theory of natural in *On the Origin of Species*.

¹⁰⁴ For an introduction to this more linguistic conception of meaning, see: Mary Hesse, “The Cognitive Claims of Metaphor,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, New Series, 2, no. 1 (1988): 1–16; Donald Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

¹⁰⁵ Feynman, Take the world from another point of view.

¹⁰⁶ Aristotle, “Metaphysics,” I.1.

¹⁰⁷ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, III.2.

¹⁰⁸ Among others passages, *Ibid.*, VI.54.

¹⁰⁹ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 1995, III.11 original translation quoted in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 187.

¹¹⁰ “We can call this kind of definition ‘physical,’ since it frees our representations from every kind of subjective and anthropomorphic consideration, as well as from every relation to the human point of view, in order to define them, as it were, scientifically and physically. Once again we note that, according to the Stoic philosophy, all is in all. Although the criticism of representations and the search for objective representations are a part of logic, they can nevertheless only be achieved if we adopt a physical point of view, by situating events and objects within the perspective of universal Nature.” Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 105.

¹¹¹ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VIII.41.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, V.26.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, VIII.28.

¹¹⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.1109.a27.

¹¹⁶ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, IX.36.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, VII.67.

¹¹⁹ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, trans. Robin Campbell, The Penguin Classics L210 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), Letter 47 (XLVII) sec. 17.

¹²⁰ Apologies for this most ridiculous of puns, but see this volume, ‘Chicken’.

¹²¹ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, ed. Christopher Gill, trans. Robin Hard, Oxford World’s Classics Paperback (Oxford [England]: Oxford University Press, 2011), VI.13.

¹²² Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VIII.38.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, VI.36.

¹²⁴ See this volume, ‘The View from Above’.

¹²⁵ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VIII.24.

¹²⁶ The strain of pessimism in Stoicism, especially in Aurelius, is common knowledge. However, it was clearly articulated to me in Gregory Hays, “Introduction,” in *Meditations*, by Marcus Aurelius, trans. Gregory Hays, Modern Library ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2002), xlv.

¹²⁷ Feynman, Take the world from another point of view. quoted in Feynman, *Curiosity*.

¹²⁸ Among others, see: Mortimer J. Adler and Charles L. Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, Rev. and updated ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972); Chuck Palahniuk, “36 Writing Craft Essays” (Unpublished, n.d.); Roy Peter Clark, *Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008); William Zinsser, *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, 30th

anniversary ed., 7th ed., rev. and updated. (New York: HarperCollins, 2006); William Strunk and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000); Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Kate L. Turrabian et al., *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers*, 8th edition., Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

¹²⁹ Plato, "Apology." What was Socrates' sentence, and what reason did the jury give? What was the real reason for his sentence? How much of a role did Socrates play in earning his sentence? Was it within Socrates' power to earn himself a different sentence, could Socrates have saved himself – and is there a difference here? What did Socrates value most highly? Could Socrates, *being Socrates*, save himself? Did he have a choice in the matter? What would we know of him if he did, and, more importantly, what would we think of him? If you were in his situation, would you have a choice in the matter? What course of action would you take?

¹³⁰ Modest Mouse, *Lonesome Crowded West* (Up Records, 1997), <http://smile.amazon.com/Lonesome-Crowded-West/dp/Booooo3Lz6?sa-no-redirect=1>.

¹³¹ I'd like to thank Jesse Corbin for telling me this parable. It turns out to have originated with the 'Taoist Farmer' story, although it has reappeared in countless forms since. I've taken liberties in this adaption, but I am indebted to the original. Additionally, I have paraphrased a few lines from the music of Circa Survive and La Dispute.

¹³² Circa Survive, *Juturna* (Equal Vision Records, 2005).

¹³³ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VII.56.

¹³⁴ Ibid., VII.62.

¹³⁵ Ibid., III.11.

¹³⁶ Ibid., IV.6.

¹³⁷ Ibid., VII.34.

¹³⁸ Ibid., VII.22.

¹³⁹ Ibid., VIII.44.

¹⁴⁰ I bought a 3/16" inch think belt from Orion Leather Company. Whatever you buy, make sure it's 'full-grain'. 'Genuine' or 'bonded' or 'real' leather is much different.

¹⁴¹ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, III.2.

¹⁴² Perhaps this is a psychological basis for the ritualistic nature of prayer.

¹⁴³ This same reasoning is why Žižek claims, paradoxically, that *Melancholia* is an optimistic film through how it handles life in the face of inevitable and impending death by asteroid impact. Slavoj Žižek, *The Optimism of Melancholia*, interview by Big Think, Fowler, and Elizabeth Rodd, Digital Video, June 26, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUIjoYDKETM>; Lars von Trier, *Melancholia*, Drama, Sci-Fi, (2011). Žižek is correct in asserting that Dunst's character is, despite her debilitating depression, the hero of the story. What Žižek neglects to mention

is that it was precisely her depression that enabled her to see death for what it was, and develop compassion in spite of it. This is the similarly powerful, and equally surprising, lesson in the third and fourth season arc of *The Legend of Korra*.

¹⁴⁴ Socrates was sentenced to death in Plato's *Apology*, denied a freely offered chance to escape in the *Crito*, and Socrates willingly accepted the assisted suicide of drinking hemlock in the *Phaedo*. He died among his friends, thinking and arguing until the very moment he had prepared for: facing death. Then, remarkably, and perhaps for the first time in his life, Socrates fell silent.

¹⁴⁵ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VII.66.

¹⁴⁶ The watchmaker analogy for nature originated in the original 1802 publication of William Paley, *Natural Theology*, ed. Matthew D. Eddy and David Knight, Reprint edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). It has been revived and repurposed several times since to combat evolution.

¹⁴⁷ I will leave questions of the original source of the universe, the natural laws, and the life that followed from them justly unanswered.

¹⁴⁸ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, IV.3.

¹⁴⁹ The corresponding Stoic maxim is 'providence or atoms', referring to a fatalistic, spiritual worldview in opposition to a random, materialistic view of the mind. See Donald Robertson, "Stoicism: Providence or Atoms?: Can You Be a Modern Stoic and an Atheist (or Agnostic)?," *Stoicism Today*, accessed July 28, 2015, <http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/stoicismtoday/2015/07/12/providence-or-atoms-atoms-donald-robertson/>; Chris Fisher, "Providence or Atoms: A Very Brief Defense of the Stoic Worldview," *Stoicism Today*, accessed July 28, 2015, <http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/stoicismtoday/2015/07/11/providence-or-atoms-providence-by-chris-fisher/>; Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, IV.27, VII.32, X.6.

¹⁵⁰ "People say to me 'Are you looking for the ultimate laws of physics?' No I'm not, I'm just looking to find out more about the world, and if it turns out there is a simple ultimate law that explains everything, so be it. That would be very nice to discover. If it turns out it's like an onion with millions of layers, and we're just sick of looking at the layers, then that's the way it is. But whatever way it comes out, nature is there and she's going to come out the way she is. Therefore, when we go to investigate it, we shouldn't pre-decide what it is we're trying to do except to find out more about it." Richard P. Feynman, *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*, Film (Nova Horizon, 1981). quoted in Richard P. Feynman, *Beauty*, Digital video, The Feynman Series, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRmbwczTC6E>.

¹⁵¹ C. S. Lewis and Walter Hooper, "On Living in an Atomic Age," in *Present Concerns*, 1st American ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986). quoted in CSLewisDoodle, *On Living in An Atomic Age by C.S. Lewis Doodle*, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxFmkgsdcyk>.

¹⁵² Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, IV.48.

¹⁵³ Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club: A Novel* (New York: Norton, 2005).

¹⁵⁴ Song from *Ping Pong the Animation*, Animation, (2014), episode. 13: Blood Tastes Like Iron

We are all alive

We're alive, that's why we sing
We are all alive
We're alive, that's why we're sad
If I hold my palm up to the sun and look
I can see my warm, red blood flowing
Even worms and crickets and water bugs
Are all alive like us, they're our friends
We are all alive
We're alive that's why we laugh
We are all alive
We're alive, that's why we're happy

¹⁵⁵ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VII.56.

¹⁵⁶ Plato, "Apology," 2002.

¹⁵⁷ Thanks to reddit.com/r/stoicism for bringing the quote to my attention. C. S. Lewis and Walter Hooper, "On Living in an Atomic Age," in *Present Concerns*, 1st American ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986) quoted in CSLewisDoodle, *On Living in An Atomic Age by C.S. Lewis Doodle*.

¹⁵⁸ Paramore, *Riot! (Fueled By Ramen)*, 2007).

¹⁵⁹ Feynman, *Beauty*.

¹⁶⁰ Story is adapted from Alcibiades' account of Socrates in Plato, *Symposium*, 219E–221B. Socrates is famous for 'knowing that he knows nothing'. The original quote reads, "Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is – for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know." Plato, "Apology."

¹⁶¹ "Throughout my life, in any public activity I may have engaged in, I am the same man as I am in private life" Plato, "Apology," 2002, 33a.

¹⁶² I'd like to thank Jonathan Lear for this tremendous insight offered during our last seminar on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in Autumn 2014.

¹⁶³ Plato, "Apology," 2002, 37e–38a.

¹⁶⁴ "Pain is neither unbearable nor unending, as long as you keep in mind its limits and don't magnify them in your imagination." Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VII.64.

¹⁶⁵ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 274e–275b.

¹⁶⁶ "For some reason, Baskerville's works were much criticised by many of his English contemporaries, 'probably because he did better work than other printers.' His print seemed too dazzling, his strokes too narrow, and his paper too glossy. One of the most common claims was that Baskerville's type would be 'a Means of blinding all the Readers in the Nation.'

Although Franklin had not bought Baskerville's type, he was eager to support him. In 1760 he wrote to Baskerville how he had enjoyed presenting a page set in the traditional Caslon to such a critic, saying it was Baskerville's, and asking him to explain its poor points:

‘He went over the several founts, shewing me everywhere what he thought Instances of that Disproportion; and declared, that he could not then read the Specimen without feeling very strongly the Pain he had mentioned to me. I spared him that time the Confusion of being told, that these were the Types he had been reading all his Life, with so much Ease to his Eyes; the Types his adored Newton is printed with, on which he has pored not a little; nay, the very Types his own Book is printed with, for he is himself an Author; and yet never discovered this painful Disproportion in them, till he thought they were yours.’

Baskerville used Franklin’s letter for the advertisement of his Folio Bible in 1763.” Olga Baird, “John Baskerville and Benjamin Franklin: A Trans-Atlantic Friendship” (Revolutionary Players), accessed July 3, 2015, www.search.revolution-aryplayers.org.uk/content/files/99/97/333.rtf.

¹⁶⁷ Thomas Malthus, “An Essay on the Principle of Population” (Project Gutenberg, 1798), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4239/4239-h/4239-h.htm>. Surely there were earlier claims, although probably not printed.

¹⁶⁸ Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible*, 1st American ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984).

¹⁶⁹ “Those who say it can’t be done are usually interrupted by others doing it.” James A. Baldwin

¹⁷⁰ CASE: “It’s not possible.”

Cooper: “No, it’s necessary.”

Christopher Nolan, *Interstellar*, Adventure, Drama, Sci-Fi, (2014).

Part III: and the Pursuit

¹⁷¹ Anthony Green, Anthony Green speech - Circa Survive Live @ Transfer Union 8/25/12, August 25, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhMxJJNLOY>.

¹⁷² Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, 54.

¹⁷³ Aristotle, “Rhetoric,” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, 2001 Modern Library Pbk. ed., The Modern Library Classics (New York: Modern Library, 2001), L1369.a5.

¹⁷⁴ See Part I, especially Power, Fundamentals, and Three Stoic Disciplines.

¹⁷⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

¹⁷⁶ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, V.1.

¹⁷⁷ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2011.

¹⁷⁸ “The best thing a human being can do is to help another human being know more.” —Charlie Munger

¹⁷⁹ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, V.1.

¹⁸⁰ A popular quote widely attributed to Aristotle, although I cannot find the source; it may have been misattributed or invented.

¹⁸¹ Seneca, *Epistles*, vol. 75–77, pt. XCIV.29.

¹⁸² Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VIII.32.

¹⁸³ The Dear Hunter, *Act IV: Rebirth in Reprise*, Audio CD (Equal Vision Records, 2015).

¹⁸⁴ Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Greater Philosophers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), 76. Durant's phrase is often misattributed to Aristotle himself because the former is summarizing the latter's views.

¹⁸⁵ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, III.11.

¹⁸⁶ "When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: The people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly. They are like this because they can't tell good from evil. But I have seen the beauty of good, and the ugliness of evil, and have recognized that the wrongdoer has a nature related to my own – not the same blood or birth, but the same mind, and possessing a share of the divine. And so none of them can hurt me. No one can implicate me in ugliness. Nor can I feel angry at my relative, or hate him. We were born to work together like feet, hands, and eyes, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower. To obstruct each other is unnatural. To feel anger at someone, to turn your back on him: these are obstructions." Ibid., II.1.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., V.19.

¹⁸⁸ "The mind is the ruler of the soul. It should remain unstirred by agitations of the flesh – gentle and violent ones alike. Not mingling with them, but fencing itself off and keeping those feelings in their place. When they make their way into our thoughts, through the sympathetic link between mind and body, don't try to resist the sensation. The sensation is natural. But don't let the mind start in with judgments, calling it 'good' or 'bad.'" Ibid., V.26.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., VII.28.

¹⁹⁰ Address to his branch and flight control team on the Monday morning following the Apollo 1 disaster (30 January 1967) as quoted in Gene Kranz, *Failure Is Not an Option: Mission Control from Mercury to Apollo 13 and beyond* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 204.

¹⁹¹ The famous phrase was, sadly, invented for the film adaptation of the mission, Ron Howard, *Apollo 13*, Adventure, Drama, History, (1995).

¹⁹² Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, II.2.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Aldo Leopold, "Thinking Like a Mountain," accessed September 25, 2015, <http://www.eco-action.org/dt/thinking.html> as quoted in Christopher Ketcham, "What the Deer Are Telling Us," *Nautilus* 11: Light, no. 5 (Spring 2014) (April 3, 2014), <http://nautilus.us/issue/11/light/what-the-deer-are-telling-us>. Thanks to Avery LaFlamme for showing me the article which served as the basis for the fictional story to follow, one in which I mixe overpopulation with a fictional slurry of real diseases: Chronic Wasting Disease (the deer equivalent of 'Mad Cow Disease'), Epizootic hemorrhagic disease, and good-old-fashioned cannibalism.

¹⁹⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.1103.b.

¹⁹⁶ Plato imagines a utopia in which everything is shared and no one knows

their parents. Only then can the destructive instincts of biology be overcome to create a just society. A ruling class of highly-educated philosopher-kings willingly deceive the lower classes to achieve this utopia. The similarity of this social scheme to today's science fiction (especially the emergence of the young adult dystopian fiction genre) is now striking. Plato, *Republic*. See also Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, 1st Perennial Classics ed. (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998).

¹⁹⁷ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

¹⁹⁸ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, V.20. See also Ryan Holiday, *The Obstacle Is the Way: The Timeless Art of Turning Trials into Triumph* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2014). and Holiday's website for expansion on this theme.

¹⁹⁹ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VI.36.

²⁰⁰ Tom Tykwer, Andy Wachowski, and Lana Wachowski, *Cloud Atlas*, Drama, Sci-Fi, (2012).

²⁰¹ Turn it inside out: What is it like? What is it like old? Or sick? Or selling it-self on the streets? They all die soon – praiser and praised, rememberer and remembered. Remembered in those parts or in a corner of them. Even there they don't all agree with each other (or even with themselves). And the whole earth a mere point in space." Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VIII.21.

²⁰² Transcript of Carl Sagan, *We Are Here: The Pale Blue Dot*, n.d., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pfwY2Tnehw>, a fan-produced video featuring narration given by Sagan for an audiobook. As such, the text is slightly different than can be found in the printed book: Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Random House, 1994). The original source was a speech at Cornell University on October 13, 1994, for which I do not know of a transcript. All, however, are in reference to the February 14, 1990 photograph of Earth by Voyager I.

²⁰³ Continued transcript of Sagan, *We Are Here: The Pale Blue Dot*. See note 202 in Part I.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ As a word, 'cosmic' portrays the true nature of its size, unlike the rather misleading but popular 'quantum leap', which in reality is a rather small distance. As such, I would be interested in eating real cosmic brownies, but I digress.

²⁰⁶ Popularized or unknown translation of Aurelius, *Meditations*, VIII.21. Interestingly enough, Sagan's uses Marcus Aurelius for this same purpose of imagining a change in scale in Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*. The connection, previously unknown to me, certainly produced a smile.

²⁰⁷ William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence," *The Poetry Foundation*, accessed August 1, 2015, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172906>.

²⁰⁸ Michel Gondry, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Drama, Romance, Sci-Fi, (2004).

²⁰⁹ This paragraph is a reconstruction of a fictitious Stoic argument as presented in Stedall, *Marcus Aurelius*, 51–52.

²¹⁰ The General Sherman Sequoia is the most-voluminous tree at 1,487m³, or

enough wood to fill some 2,625 refrigerators. It is, indeed, 275m tall and 25m around (at chest height). But it is not the tallest, the widest, or the oldest, only the most massive alive today. And the Lindsey Creek tree (felled in 1905 by a storm) was nearly double Sherman's volume at 2,550m³. "List of Superlative Trees," *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, July 18, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_superlative_trees&oldid=672042647 and "Lindsey Creek Tree," *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, May 9, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Lindsey_Creek_tree&oldid=661509993.

²¹¹ A single night sky's worth of stars defined as the 7x10²² stars visible from earth through a telescope. David Derbyshire, "More Stars 'than Grains of Sand,'" *The Telegraph*, July 23, 2003, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/australia-andthepacific/australia/1436902/More-stars-than-grains-of-sand.html>.

²¹² An estimated number of 1x10²⁹ stars in the observable universe. Elizabeth Howell, "How Many Stars Are in the Universe?," *Space.com*, May 31, 2014, <http://www.space.com/26078-how-many-stars-are-there.html>.

²¹³ Krulwich still cites the 2003 study, ignoring the later, larger estimate. Robert Krulwich, "Which Is Greater, The Number Of Sand Grains On Earth Or Stars In The Sky?," *NPR.org*, September 17, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/sections/krulwich/2012/09/17/161096233/which-is-greater-the-number-of-sand-grains-on-earth-or-stars-in-the-sky>.

²¹⁴ Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964); Alain de Botton, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, 1st American ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000); Norman Malcolm, G. H. von Wright, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, 2nd ed. / (Oxford [Oxfordshire]: Oxford University Press, 1984); Robert Greene, *Mastery* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013); Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*; Holiday, *The Obstacle Is the Way*; Peter Bevelin, *Seeking Wisdom: From Darwin to Munger*, 3rd edition (Malmö, Sweden: PCA Publications L.L.C., 2007).

²¹⁵ Paolo Menicucci, "Brazil v Italy: Classic Encounters," *UEFA*, June 22, 2013, <http://www.uefa.com/worldcup/news/newsid=1932884.html>.

²¹⁶ Michael Barry, "Blueprint for Success: Pelé," *Primer*, accessed September 1, 2015, <http://www.primermagazine.com/2014/live/blueprint-for-success-pele>.

²¹⁷ Roger Brooks, "Pele: Eye on the Ball," *Text, Success*, (May 25, 2011), <http://www.success.com/article/pele-eye-on-the-ball>.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Really though, I just made up this story. It is, however, based in historical fact. I have set the fictionalized time of Aurelius' writings at 175 AD, the time of General Avidius Cassius' usurpation. Ten years prior would be 165 AD, the return of Verus' and Cassius' from their Mesopotamian campaign, a journey which first brought the plague to Rome. That said, I have tried to write as closely as possible to the spirit of Aurelius' personal writings, of which our primary source is the *Medita-*

tions, his posthumously published journal. I cannot recommend the Hays translation highly enough: Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002. For more on Aurelius' life and personal writing style see Marcus Aurelius and Marcus Cornelius Fronto, *Marcus Aurelius in Love*, ed. and trans. Amy Richlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*; Stedall, *Marcus Aurelius*; Anthony Birley, *Marcus Aurelius, a Biography*, Rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Timeline from "Marcus Aurelius," *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, September 15, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcus_Aurelius. Inaccuracies are my own.

²²² A paraphrase of *Iliad* 6.146, one of Aurelius' favorite passages, and an image he would often recall to remind him of his mortality. Although not quoted here, a good translation and beautiful book can nevertheless be found in the deluxe paperback edition of Homer, *The Iliad*, ed. Bernard Knox, trans. Robert Fagles, Reissue edition (New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Penguin Classics, 1998).

²²³ Adams, *How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big*, 46.

²²⁴ Jon. Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, 1st ed. (New York: Villard Books, 1996), 56–57.

²²⁵ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2002, VI.16.

Appendices

²²⁶ reddit, "What Is the Best Translation of Marcus Aurelius's Meditations?," *r/Stoicism*, accessed June 28, 2015, http://www.reddit.com/r/Stoicism/wiki/faq#wiki_what_is_the_best_translation_of_marcus_aurelius.27s_meditations.3F. Note that this link may change over time.

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Zachary G. Augustine is a student of philosophy and history at the University of Chicago. Zach is from Binghamton, NY.

